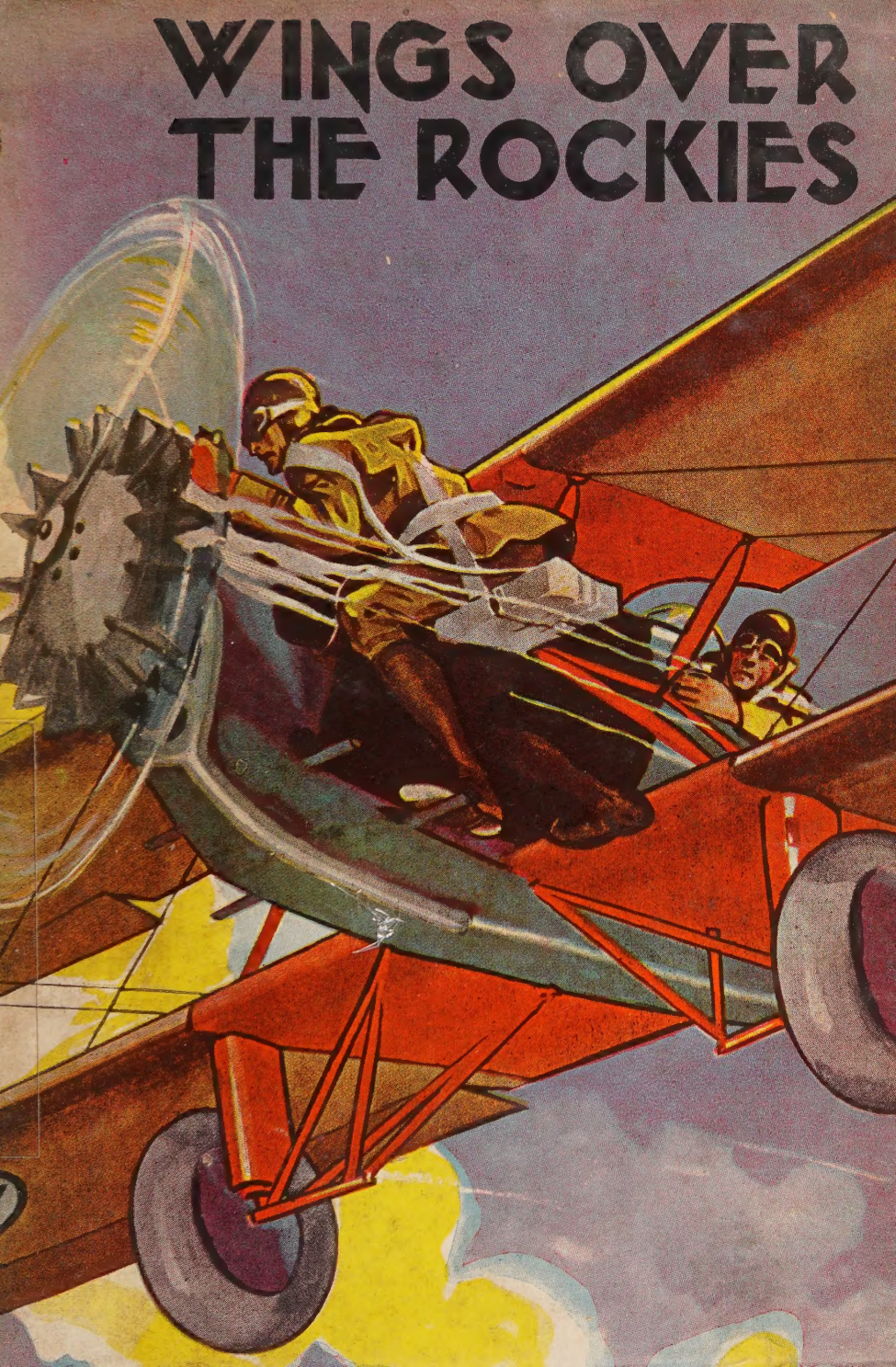
WINGS OVER THE ROCKIES



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WINGS OVER THE ROCKIES

OR

Jack Ralston's New Cloud Chaser

BY

AMBROSE NEWCOMB

Author of "The Sky Detectives," "Eagles of the Sky," etc., etc.

Published by

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Wings Over The Rockies

CHAPTER I

WAITING FOR ORDERS

"Hot ziggetty dog! I kinder guess now Jack, we've been an' put the new cloud-chaser through every trick we've got up our sleeves — flopped her over on her back, righted her, to turn turtle again, done nose-dives an' Immelmann turns, made a shivery sixteen thousand foot ceilin' for altitude — an' now, after all this circus stunt business, we figger she's a real ship, queen o' the air-ways."

"Perk, you never said truer words and I'm sure proud of the fact that our Big Boss up at Washington appreciated that little Florida job we put through last winter, so's to put us in charge of such a swell air craft."

"Ginger pop! we used to reckon our old crate some punkins at speedin', when *real* flyin' was needed but shucks! with this cracker-jack boat we could make all kinds o' rings 'round the old bus or else my name ain't Gabe Perkiser."

The young leather clad pilot at the controls, as if to still further emphasize his good opinion of the spanking, up-to-date plane they had for some days been joyfully testing out, volplaned down on a long coast just as though a merciless enemy craft were on their tail with a babbling machine-gun keeping up an intermittent fire and a hail of bullets filling the air around them.

Then he leveled off, attained a dizzy speed, turned, banked, and came roaring back to execute a dazzling monster figure-eight sweep.

"Great stuff, old hoss!" cried the exultant Perk for they had their earphones adjusted so as to be able to exchange comments at will, despite any racket caused by the madly racing motor and spinning propeller combined.

"I reckon that will be enough juice used up for today," Jack Ralston was saying in a thoroughly satisfied tone, "and now we'd better make a bee-line for our landing field. It'll be the same old story,—a gang gathering around to admire our new boat—and all trying to find out just who we are and what big air company we're connected with."

Thereupon Perk chuckled in a queer way he had, evidently vastly amused.

"We got 'em right goofy with guessin', partner, for a fact. How the curious minded boobs do try to squeeze a few grains o' informa-

tion out of us with their foxy questions. I've heard some wise-cracks along them lines silly enough to make a hoss laugh an' all o' the remarks ain't jest as complimentary as I'l like, not by a long shot."

"Little we care," remarked Jack, adjusting his goggles to a more satisfactory angle and releasing the ear flaps of his helmet. They had left the frigid altitude where they had climbed almost as though shot upward by some monster cannon, thanks to the novel wings with which the new ship was equipped.

"Huh! let 'em try to outsmart us," Perk went on to say, a bit scornfully. "We c'n jest keep our lips buttoned tight an' mind our own business. Won't be long, anyway, I guess, till we hear from Headquarters an' have to jump off on some fresh stunt, roundin' up the slick crooks who keep puttin' their thumbs on their noses an' wigglin' their fingers at Uncle Sam's Secret Service boys — counterfeiters, smugglers, aliens crossing the borders, booze from out on the high seas, makers o' moonshine in the mountings and on the burnin' deserts like Death Valley an' such riffraff that scoffs at the law!"

Perk, as he was generally called by his friends, was really a World War veteran, having served aboard a "sausage" observation balloon and later on as a fighting pilot of more than average

bravery and ability. He did his "daily dozen" through the whole desperate series of conflicts in the Argonne with a fair number of "flaming coffins" placed to his credit—enemy ships shot down on fire.

Since quitting the army after the Armistice put a stop to all hostilities, Perk had passed through quite a number of vocations that appealed to the unrest in his blood, demanding so strenuously a calling built upon more or less continual excitement.

He had been a barn-storming pilot, giving exhibitions of reckless parachute jumping from high altitudes and similar stunts at county fairs and other public gatherings and had also spent several years as a valued member of the Mounted Police up in the Canadian Northwest country. He finally was drafted into Uncle Sam's Secret Service by reason of an official having met up with him when moose hunting in the trackless wilds of northern British Columbia.

When Jack Ralston, who himself had gained a little fame in the Secret Service on account of generally bringing in his man, was selected to pilot a speedy ship he picked Gabe Perkiser whom he had known for some time and whose companionable disposition as well as unquestioned courage made him an ideal pal—in Jack's eyes at least.

Their first assigment called for service carrying the flyers over the Mexican border to apprehend a notorious character who had long been a thorn in the flesh of the Washington authorities, since he came and went, mostly via the air route, crashing Uncle Sam's frontier gate with cargoes of undesirable aliens, usually Chinese, willing to pay as much as a thousand dollars per head for an opportunity to enter the States, forbidden ground to those of their race.*

Having, despite all difficulties, carried out their instructions to the letter and handed over their man to the nearest U. S. District Attorney for prosecution, Jack and Perk were later on dispatched with their efficient plane to the Gulf Coast of Florida, there to break up a powerful combination of smugglers through whose bold and lawless ventures, by air and sea, the whole Southern country was being submerged in a flood of foreign brands of liquor.

Again the two pals proved their calibre and brought home the bacon, having dealt the rum-runners a severe jolt and actually kidnaped the chief offender.†

Now they were daily anticipating still another assignment which, for aught they knew might carry them to the Maine border or even to

*See the first volume of this Series, *"The Sky Detectives."*
†See the preceding story entitled, *"Eagles of the Sky."*

Alaska — all sectors of our wide country look alike to energetic Secret Service agents especially when they have magical wings with which to annihilate space and carry them through cloudland at a hundred miles and more an hour.

It looked very much as though their excellent record was being fully appreciated at Headquarters for there had come to them a wonderfully equipped new ship, carrying many lately discovered and new inventions calculated to lighten the labors of the man at the controls as well as to secure a degree of safety never before attained in any craft.

Jack was heading for the home port, quite satisfied with the finishing check-up of the amazing attributes of their new acquisition, and as for Perk, he could hardly contain himself, such was his enthusiasm in connection with their trying-out process.

"Beats anything that carries wings," he vowed in his characteristic fashion, "and it's bound to be a poor day for any guy who thinks he c'n get away from this race hoss o' the skies. See how she snorts on her course will you, partner, and us agoin' at mor'n a hundred an' thirty right now! This is the life for me, an' I wouldn't care much if my legs got so scramped I couldn't walk a

mile—some birds are like that, I understand, buzzards f'r instance fairly wobble on the ground but able to put the kibosh on most other feathered folks when they take off in their clumsy way."

Jack did not show much desire to keep up the conversation—the fact of the matter was he felt more or less tired after a long day in the clouds and much preferred to pay strict attention to the many dials on the black dashboard just in front, with which he was by degrees becoming familiar.

The afternoon was drawing near its close, with the sun drawing closer to the mountainous horizon off to the west. So after swinging on their way for half an hour they were able to glimpse their destination which was the Cheyenne, Wyoming, airport.

"Keep up your bluffing when we land Perk, remember," warned Jack as he started to circle at a height of a thousand feet and could see a number of people running this way and that, undoubtedly in their endeavor to be close by when their landing gear struck the ground.

This wonderful new plane, and the mysterious pair of pals handling it had continued to excite the curiosity not only of pilots using the field, but aviation bugs who haunted the place as well. These folks were enthusiasts over the exploits of

noted flyers, but not venturesome enough themselves to wish to become pilots, even though they were of the right calibre. However, they knew considerable about ships and their furniture so as to be able to appreciate anything exceedingly novel along those lines.

"Watch my smoke, partner," said Perk complacently enough. "I'm not agoin' to let any o' that mob crab my game. Men in our class don't go around doin' their stuff in the open, like they was magicians throwin' a fit. We got to know how to mix things a heap an' pull the wool over the eyes o' the crowd. So far as they need to know, we're jest a couple o' guys out for a lark an' with shekels to burn."

"That's the ticket Perk, keep the racket going up to the time we pull out of Cheyenne no matter which way we climb. Well, here goes to knock our tail on the ground again then for a bite of supper at the Emporium and a look in at some show. I'm getting a bit tired of this inaction, to tell you the honest truth. I reckon both of us will be glad to get our next orders and cut loose with our nobby ship."

"You said a mouthful buddy that time," observed Perk as he raised his hands with the intention of removing the earphones since they were at the end of their afternoon check-up, de-

lightfully happy because their plane had shown its exceedingly strong points.

Now they were circling for the last time and those below, discovering just about where they meant to land, had started on the run, apparently eager to be on hand in order to obtain a fresh close-up of the mysterious chums who had been hanging around the airport for such a length of time.

Never had a boat dropped down more lightly than did their craft—Jack could not help giving his mate a look of overpowering joy at the slight impact, which was returned in full measure by the proud Perk who anticipated wonderful things to come when they got going for fair up among the clouds or dodging through the canyons of the mighty Rockies, wherever the hand of Fate, and orders from Headquarters, took them.

So the landing was made and the wonder ship safely housed in the hangar they had hired which could be securely locked to keep curious minded or unscruplous people from trying to get a line on its several novel features.

A short but serious-looking chap came up to have a few words with Jack—this was the party who had been hired especially to keep watch and ward over their highly prized aerial steed.

Cal Stevens had been recommended as a man to be trusted and although he had no positive knowledge of their identity, he did know they were clean sportsmen and men of their word. Consequently Jack felt the precious ship given into their charge by the Government would be carefully guarded throughout each night.

They left the field with several figures trailing after them for the mystery hovering over their movements had piqued the curiosity of a number of men. All manner of queer stories, resting on insecure foundations, had been rumored so that people pointed them out in the street and some wise-acres even gained considerable notoriety by pretending to know it all, though under a pledge to keep their secret inviolate.

It became even necessary to resort to expedients in order to shake these snoopers as the indignant Perk called them and usually a vehicle of some sort offered them an easy way to beat out the clan. On this particular evening, however, a big car occupied by several men whom they did not remember having noticed before, kept after their own vehicle up to the very door of the modest house in which they had a room.

"I say it's a danged shame," stormed the angry Perk as the two of them started to strip and get into ordinary citizen's clothing so they would not

attract unpleasant attention while eating their supper and attending the movies later on—"that pesky car kept on our tail right up to the door an' chances are it's parked somewhere out there right now, awaitin' for us to hike over to the Emporium restaurant. Riles me for fair, partner, an' for two cents I'd like to stand them hoboes on their heads, on'y I guess that'd be fool's play for me."

"It certainly would, Perk," his chum assured him as they dressed. "Men in the detective line never want to draw attention to themselves for once it's known what calling they're engaged in and a lot of their value to their employers is lost. That's just why the detectives in big cities like New York wear masks when suspects are lined up each morning for inspection. You know that, of course, Perk, but I'm just reminding you because if you get all 'het up' you might say or do something that would spill the beans for us."

"I'll cool down right away, Jack old hoss," the other assured him contritely. "That's my greatest weakness you know, an' I'm countin' on my best pal to keep a finger on my pulse so's to check me up when I threaten to run loose with my too ready tongue. Wait a minute, Jack, till I get a paper so I c'n read up on the dope as I munch my feed. I'm wanting to learn whether anything's been heard from our mutual friend,

Buddy Warner, the best air mail pilot on the job today."

"I certainly hope he's turned up since we jumped off this morning," said Jack with more than his customary earnestness. "There must be a dozen or two ships scouring the country in search of Buddy." This pilot had never reached his port of call two days back and is believed to be down somewhere in that wild country among the big hills and canyons, either dead or badly hurt and needing a helping hand right away.

Perk gave a hurried glance at the scare-heads on the front page of the newspaper he had purchased and then grunted dismally.

"Nothin' doin' so far, partner," he announced with a sigh that welled up from the very depths of his warm, friendly heart. "More ships a'startin' out from every-which-way. A happenin' like this, when the lost guy chances to be a friendly dick that everybody likes, seems to arouse that sportsman spirit that you find in all air pilot circles. It gets to be a reg'lar *fever,* with even famous flyers givin' up vacations they'd been lookin' forward to for weeks, just to start out an' try to locate the lost man. Huh! nothin'd tickle me more than a chance to lend a hand myself, on'y we're in the Government's employ and can no more quit our job than air mail lads could throw the letter sacks in the dis-

card and sail around peekin' into every gulch an' hidin' place in the mountings in hopes o' bein' the lucky guy to fetch Buddy back."

"I'm mighty sorry nothing's been found out," said Jack, "but the boys are sure to comb every rod of ground again and again until it's certain he can't be located. But here's our resturant Perk, so let's drop in and dine."

CHAPTER II

PERK GROWS SUSPICIOUS

"I swan if it don't beat all creation what stuff these newspaper boys do turn out when they're put on the job o' pickin' up sensational news," Perk was saying some time later as both he and his companion were satisfying their hunger with such viands as appealed to their taste upon the bill of fare.

"What ails you now, comrade?" asked Jack, smilingly for he always found the strongly expressed likes and dislikes of his chum a never failing well of interest that frequently brought out one of his seldom used chuckles.

"Why, seems like they never let a chance get past to fetch Lindbergh into the picture, no matter if he's three thousand miles off as the crow flies. Here one account tells that it's '*reported* our distinguished air pilot's set out to lend a hand at findin' poor Buddy Warner,' who, the story goes, 'used to be a blanket pal o' Lindbergh's away back in them balmy days when Charles jumped with his little chute at county fairs an' did the barn-stormin' racket. Not that he

wouldn't be on the job if on'y he didn't happen to be away off around New York right now, up to his eyes in business connected with the new air line he's at the head of. Course lots o' good folks'll swallow this story without a question but it's jest a sample o' wild newspaper stuff—no man c'n be on the Atlantic coast an' out here in the Rockies at the same time. Gosh! but they do pull the wool over some people's eyes these days —anything for a sensation an' to get the jump over the other cub reporters."

"But Perk, we do happen to know that there are quite a number of noted pilots out scouring the entire region and sticking to their job like leeches, under their sporting slogan 'do as you'd be done by'."

"Sure thing, partner—that's legitimate news and not faked," agreed the other with a grunt as he speared a small boiled onion of which he was very fond, and thrust it into his mouth. "Lindbergh is a wonder, as we all know, but there's a limit to his activities and it ain't fair to want him to take hold o'everything that comes along. Now he's doubled up and took him a wife. They reckon nothin' c'n be carried through without his name bein' tacked on somehow or other 'Taint fair to that boy, an' them's my sentiments."

Jack shook his head and looked serious.

"Then the mystery is as deep as ever and they haven't yet found out what happened to poor Buddy?" he asked, to which Perk shook his head in the negative, saying:

"Never a thing—all wrapped up in a black fog—he started off in high spirits and with a joke on his lips an' then disappeared like he never was. Hang it all, why couldn't I have been doin' some other sorter job where they might a let me off for a spell? Nothin' I'd like better than to comb the hull countryside in hopes o' findin' that bully boy—he told me once 'bout that mother o' his'n. I kinder guess she must be a peach, he thought so much o' her. Lands sake! but it might even kill her if her boy ain't never heard from again. I'd give every dollar I got in the wide world—which ain't boastin' none I know—if only I was a free agent an' goin' on my own hook."

"Hard luck, partner," soothed Jack, laying a hand on the arm of his pal as if to sympathize with the impulsive one; "but of course that's out of the question, you and me—we're under a contract that can't be broken recklessly, no matter what happens and we've just *got* to keep everlastingly on the job till our time is up when we can either renew or get out."

"I guess you got it down pat, Jack," agreed the other with a heavy sigh that told of his regret

being genuine. Perk was one of those queer chaps who are born with a stubborn itch to find *anything* that is said to be lost which would account in part for his having thrown in his fortunes with both the Northwest Mounted Police and now the United States Secret Service.

"Besides, there was a sort of intimation in that late letter from the Big Boss," Jack went on to say, "that seemed to hint at something big coming our way before very long so all we can do is to keep hoping for some luck and doing our daily stunt flying so as to learn all the wrinkles connected with our new cloud-chaser as you like to call the ship we're attached to right now."

"Why do you keep on turning your head a little while you're eating I'd like to know, Perk —got to seeing things again, like you did once before, I remember?" continued Jack.

"Huh! I'm jest takin' a peep in that mirror over there partner," replied Perk in a low tone that had a slight air of mystery about it, Jack imagined.

"Pretty girl this time struck you where your heart is soft, eh, buddy?" Jack inquired with a chuckle.

"Not this time old hoss—take a squint yourself—see them two fellers sittin' at the corner table, where they c'n watch us? — well, seems like they take a heap o' pleasure keepin' tabs on

us while we sit here and gobble. I'm wonderin' who and what they are also why they bother to keep an eye on our actions right along."

"Yes, I can see them out of the tail of my eye," Jack told him. "Don't you remember the pair in the big touring car that kept ducking after us?—I reckon these boys are that same couple. Did you notice them sitting there when we came in?"

"Nothin' doin' that way, Boss," Perk told him with a positive ring to his voice. "I chanced to turn my head a few minutes after we got settled down, an' they were walkin' over to that corner like they'd sized up the table as if it suited their plans. Ever since, they've kept talkin' in low tones, an' watchin' us like I've seen a fox do, hidin' in the brush an' waitin' for a fat young partridge to come close enough for him to make a spring and grab his dinner."

Jack refused to become flustered, even if Perk showed signs of being annoyed.

"Oh!" he went on to remark casually, "chances are they may be some of those pests of newspaper boys, scenting a scoop of a story for their sensation loving sheets—competition is so keen these days they lie awake nights I'm told, and accept all sorts of chances of being kicked out if only they can get the right sort of stuff to build up into a thriller."

"Mebbe so, mebbe so," grumbled the indig-

nant Perk, "but anyhow I don't like it a bit. That dark-faced guy strikes me as a pretty tough sort o' scrapper, one I'd hate to smack up against in a dark alley an' the other ain't much shakes as a good-looker either. Jack, do you think they know who we are and got some sort o' grudge against us on 'count o' the trade we foller, eh, what?"

"Oh! it might be so," replied the other, "anything is possible and while we've been lucky enough to hide our light under a bushel all the time we've hung around the Cheyenne airport, we couldn't expect to keep that game up indefinitely, you understand. After all, we hope to be pulling our freight and slipping out of this burg before long. So we'll just keep our eyes open for stormy weather and be on our guard."

"Hot ziggetty dog! I sure do hope now they ain't meanin' to bust in on our fine ship an' play hob with her — wouldn't that jar you though, partner?" and Perk could be seen to grind those big white teeth of his as if gripped by a spasm of rage almost beyond his control. Like the Arab whose love for his horse is said to exceed any affection for his wife, most sky pilots feel an overpowering regard for their ship in which they risk their lives every time they jump off and Perk was peculiarly built that way.

"That would be a calamity for a fact," ad-

mitted Jack, giving the two men under suspicion another little survey, "but we've got a good guard keeping tabs over the boat and he's empowered to shoot if some one tries any funny business out at the hangar, so I reckon there's nothing to worry over in that direction."

Perk continued to grumble, half beneath his breath, showing how he felt under the skin about the matter. Jack on his part skillfully directed the low conversation into other and more cheerful channels so that presently, after the two strangers had passed out of the restaurant, Perk seemed to put them aside as "false alarms" and entered into the discussion of the merits of their beloved cloud-chaser with a modicum of his usual good nature which was just what his chum wished to have happen, so as to clear the atmosphere, which, in Perk's case was getting considerably muddy.

CHAPTER III

THE HOLD-UP

Jack had certainly shown considerable cunning in starting to talk about some of the clever and novel devices with which their new ship was equipped in order to turn the attention of his chum into more pleasant channels for Perk soon became most eloquent in speaking of those wonderful discoveries.

"It sure is a great stunt, us bein' able to quit the ground in ten shakes o' a lamb's tail," he was speedily remarking, "'stead of havin' to take such a long an' often bumpy run. The way that boat acts under your pilotin' makes me think o' how a clumsy buzzard when scared, gives a hop up into the air for a few feet, starts them big wings o' his'n workin' and goes hoppetty-skippetty off on an upward slant. Seems like the next thing we know we'll have some sorter contraption that'll jest give us a toss, like you'd fling a pigeon up, for a gunner to smack after it'd started to fly out o' bounds."

"I understand," Jack told him, smoothly enough, "they've got something mighty near as

wonderful as that, only it lacks just a little finishing touch to make it sure pop. Five years from now the boys who've come through with their lives will be looking back to *our* day as being still in the woods, and us pilots rough neck amateurs — such staggering things will be the regular line by then."

"Jest see how the've changed a heap o' the instruments we used to swear by in them days o' the big war over in France, eh Jack? You don't see so much difference, but us boys who were in that scrap sometimes c'n hardly believe it's the same aviation world we're livin' in. From compass to pontoons, a dozen or two things have been vastly improved. Look at the new ship; we got aluminum pontoons to let us light on the water of a river, lake or the sea itself and with the wheels set in the shoes so as to make a landin' on dry land whenever we feel like it."

"Pretty slick trick that, I own up, buddy," admitted Jack, "and best of all they seem to work like magic in the bargain. And of course we still go under the same old name of *amphibian,* for we can drop down anywhere with only a fair-sized opening."

"Too bad they didn't give the fine boat a name —havin' only a number gives it a sorter orphan look, strikes me," continued Perk, thus voicing

an old grievance that thus far he had kept to himself.

"I knew that bone was bothering you some, partner," Jack told him, "and now you've mentioned it we might as well have it out. Names are all very fine for ordinary airships because there's every reason for giving them publicity, which helps business along; but in our case that's exactly what we want to avoid like a sick tooth. Get that now, brother, do you?"

"Huh! I flop, partner—queer how I didn't think o' that before you mentioned it jest now. Some day mebbe I'll be workin' in a line that don't have to keep things shady all the time—gettin' my fill o' sneakin' an' snoopin' so's to pull in results."

"Here's wishing you luck, boy," Jack was saying with a vein of seriousness in his voice, "but see here what's bearing down on us like a ship under full sail?—he must have been out of sight behind that partition all the time we've sat here—got a wide grin on his sunburned face, which looks kind of familiar to me. Know him, Perk?"

"Zowie! I'd jest say I do partner, don't you see, it's my old friend Cyclone Davis, the cowboy we've seen more'n once doin' his stunts on the screen. Hey there, Cyclone, where'd you pop up from, old pard?"

Perk in evident excitement had jumped up

from his chair and with outstretched hand met the oncoming grinning range rider with tumultuous joy, slapping him on the back, wringing his hand furiously and giving a most energentic display of delight at the unexpected meeting.

"Sit down here an' have a little chin, Cyclone —meet my side partner, Jack Ralston. Got to walk back to our room with us so's to tell how you happened to break into the movies an' make such a big hit. Glory! didn't it bring back old times when I saw you prancin' around, knocking some big guy on his back like you used to do when in the prize ring as a comin' welterweight champion. Now, start doin' your stuff, old pard."

Innumerable questions from the excited Perk brought out more or less interesting information for Cyclone proved to be quite a good talker. They managed to keep their voices lowered, although it could be plainly seen Jud Davis was as a rule built along the jolly and noisy type of optimistic chap, such as make hosts of friends wherever they roam; but he seemed to sense the fact that the two in whose company he now found himself wished to keep strangers from overhearing the subject of their confab and thus toned down his effusiveness accordingly.

That was a subject Jack kept constantly in

mind—the avoidance of anything calculated to put the spot-light of public attention on his doings—he would have been broken hearted if some morning, after having played a big game to a successful conclusion, with his man safely lodged behind the bars, to see on the front page of the daily papers a picture of himself, no matter how poorly executed and thus holding a member of the Government Secret Service up for every law-breaker in the wide land to stamp on his mind as something to be never forgotten and thus greatly lessen his capacity for efficient work.

"We're jest about through here, old hoss," Perk finally told the other "an' you jest got to fall in so's to sit with us a while in our room so we c'n tell you what we're a'doin' as boon pals. I know right well it'll never go any further, 'cause you happen to be one o' them fellers what c'n button their lips tight as a clam, with never a single leak."

"That's all right, Perk," came the other's reassuring answer, "I've got a few hours more to spend in Cheyenne and then I'm heading direct for the old motion picture studios at Hollywood to do a few easy stunts in a new picture they're going to build up—I'm a cow puncher again, you understand, Perk, though I own up now and then my old fighting profession comes in pretty well when there's some scrapping taking place

between the cowboy mob and the cattle rustlers or Mex outlaws of the border."

Perk listened to everything the other said with an enraptured expression upon his face, he doubtless was able to mentally picture some of those exciting episodes described by Cyclone and felt an itch to be in similar hand-to-hand battles where real blows were exchanged in order to make the scene realistic when depicted on the silver screen.

Jack could hear him giving many a full-sized sigh when Cyclone was running off some of his many adventures with a vein of real humor back of his provocative words and from this could readily believe his chum was having the time of his life.

After a while they all arose, and paying their reckoning at the desk, the proprietor eyed the trio as though he rather suspected they must be Tom Mix and some of his movie friends off on a holiday jaunt—possibly there must have been a certain jaunty air about Cyclone's manner that stamped him as belonging to those who moved out on location and cut all manner of amazing capers before the camera.

It proved to be pretty dark on the street with few persons abroad, although the hour was not late. The neighborhood happened to be a bit lonely, Jack noticed as they walked along three

abreast, Cyclone continuing a recital of some comical as well as near tragic happening through which he had lately passed.

They would not have very far to go to reach their destination which had been one of the reasons for Jack selecting the Emporium as their dining place its convenience appealing to him more than anything else.

At a certain point where the gloom was somewhat more dense than in other localities, Jack noticed a motor standing close to the curb and with one of its rear doors standing open. The engine was running, for its steady throb could be plainly heard. But then such a thing is no uncommon occurrence when some busy folks have trouble in starting the engine and prefer to leave it running while they dash into the house for a minute or so.

Just as they came opposite, he noted that it was a large touring car but the significance of this was borne in upon Jack's mind with a rush when two dark figures suddenly sprang out from behind the waiting motor, and with outstretched hands confronted himself and companions while a deep bass voice snapped out the words:

"Put 'em up, and be snappy about it too, boys!"

CHAPTER IV

A CHANCE CLUE

It was a holdup pure and simple, appearances would indicate. Jack could see in the uncertain light that each of the men gripped a gat in his fingers, covering the astonished trio; he also made out that they had handkerchiefs covering the lower portions of their faces, which made it all the more interesting, since nothing was lacking to fix the picture in the mind as worthy of the latest movie thriller.

Jack apparently started to raise both hands in obedience to the order so brusquely given but with an incredibly speedy move he suddenly threw out his right hand and caught the wrist of the nearest holdup man, giving it a twist that compelled the bandit to let his gun fall to the ground.

Then there was Cyclone, true to form as his nick-name would indicate, making a lightning play and leaping on the second bandit with the agility of a Canada lynx pouncing on a bounding rabbit.

This fellow, taken off his guard it seemed,

managed to shoot but the bullet went wild and before he could recover enough to do any damage he was being whirled this way and that in the dazzling fashion shown by the cowboy actor in all his pictures and which had gained him his well earned fame.

Poor Perk, who was left in the lurch, there being no third party in sight whom he could tackle, hardly knew what to do—he kept jumping from one whirlagig to the other, endeavoring to get in a swing with his fist but with rather meager success for he feared to exert himself to the utmost since there was danger of the blow coming in contact with a friendly head instead of the one he meant to strike.

Jack had knocked his man down twice by well directed blows but each time the rascal climbed to his feet again, being no mean hand it seemed at a scrimmage. He must have been built along the bulldog line more or less, for even while taking a lot of punishment he still stuck to his guns.

The third time he managed to close in and again they went spinning round and round, held fast in each others' arms, breathing hard, and endeavoring to effect a windup of the struggle.

Perhaps the would-be holdup man may have begun to suspect that the pistol-shot would likely

enough bring some one running to the spot—even a cop who may have been on duty not far away, at any rate he began to fight most desperately to break loose, thinking that discretion would be the better part of valor and that "he who fights and runs away, may live to fight another day," as the old saying has it.

At first, somewhat to Jack's astonishment, he realized the man was trying with might and main to force him toward the open door of the touring car as though it may have been his intention to take him "for a ride." That significant phrase had become so notorious of late, in accounts of rival gang fights in the big cities of the East, that Jack really began to believe these men aimed to carry him off in their touring car to do something terrible when outside the city limits and then toss him out on the side of the road as a victim to some unknown species of hatred and revenge.

Of course there was no time just then to try and analyze this strange supposition for all his energies must be engaged in endeavoring to down the unknown who was just then locked in his arms.

Cyclone was having a beautiful time, giving his man a full measure of the stuff that lay in those steel muscles of his and which had doped

out many a case of k.o. when he was in the prize ring. Indeed the fellow was so confused and befuddled by the cracks he received on his head and chest that he put up only a puny defense.

It proved to be such a one-sided affair that Cyclone felt ashamed to keep doing all the hitting and presently lifting the almost senseless wretch he actually tossed him into the car with a crash.

This seemed to give Jack's opponent a flash of commonsense for he burst out of the encircling arms and dove after his pal, Jack having no desire to follow after and try to drag him out again, since as a rule he was far from being a hog for punishment.

The man lost not a second in starting his machine which went off down the dimly lighted street like a crazy thing. zigzagging from curb to curb, just as Jack remembered seeing shown in comics on the screen.

There was disconsolate Perk, looking as provoked as any one could be, shaking his head, and punching one fist into the other palm.

"Such rotten luck!" he was moaning as he strode around the late battlefield. "Every feller had his hand in but poor me; what've I done to be cheated out o' my share like I was a baby? Why, oh! why wasn't there three bums in the

bunch, just enough to go around; dang 'em, why did they want to crab my game like that?"

Jack who could keep from bursting into a loud laugh only through severe measures along the line of repression, managed to soothe the unhappy Perk by judicious words of sympathy.

"If only I'd known you wanted a little exercise so much partner," he observed without the flicker of a smile, "why, I'd have tossed him over to you with pleasure. Then Cyclone here should have slipped you his bird while he was jumping him around at such a great rate. However, it's past now, and the damage can't be mended. Next opening that comes along, brother, I solemnly promise to let you try your hand so it won't get out of practice."

"That's a bargain, Jack old hoss," Perk hastened to say as if anxious to make it a compact between them, "an' I won't say what'll be on the cards when I try an' make up for all the times I've been cheated o' my share o' the gate receipts. Now, what next I wonder?"

"We'll just trot along home and see if there are any hurts needing attention," replied Jack. "That one I tackled could squeeze like a bear but my being able with a hand free to swat him several times in the jowl, made him ease up more or less until in the end he weakened and went

skidoo. Come along fellows, let's be hiking into the next street where we put up and get our sleep."

Everybody seemed quite willing to call it the close of a perfect day and let things go at that—the holdup men had long since vanished from view; there was more or less danger of a prowling cop having heard that sound of firing and after summoning help, might be on the way to learn the cause. Not wishing to be mixed up in anything that might hold them in Cheyenne for days awaiting a police court trial, Jack had plenty of good reasons for wanting to depart while the going was good. So they trotted along, arm in arm.

In good order they reached the private house where the two flyers slept and soon were sitting in the most comfortable fashion possible in the apartment. Perk had carefully closed and locked the door, something Jack could not remember him doing all the time they had been housed under that hospitable roof which showed how wrought up Perk must have become.

"An' I'm still a'wonderin' what their silly game could a been," he was saying in a whining tone accompanied with another shake of his head. "None o' us look a bit like bloated plutocrats, 'less it might be Cyclone here but seems

like that tall lad was a'tryin' to shove you into his blamed old car, Jack like they wanted to kidnap you—noticed that didn't you?"

"Well it struck me that way too, Perk," he was told unhesitatingly, "which has me guessing good and hard; what reason could they have for wanting to knock me out of the running—taking me for a ride that way?"

"Shucks! partner," commented Perk immediately, "they be a'plenty o' guys who'd laugh to know you an' me'd kicked the bucket, pe'ticularly you, Jack. Some o' them lads you've sent up to the pen might have pals at large who'd be ready to make you cash in for playin' them a trick that cost 'em their liberty. Revenge I kinder guess is a poisonous weed that takes a quick rooting in the average prison bird's heart —sorter helps to make him better able to bear the years he's got to serve. If on'y he could know the man as sent him into quod had been rapped on the head and kicked out o' a speedin' car."

"That makes me think of something," Jack remarked just then as he rammed a hand down into one of his coat pockets and drew a yellow piece of paper out. "I chanced to see this lying on the pavement after our birds had taken French leave; it may help us to understand what now looks like a dark mystery beyond our solving."

He glanced at what turned out to be a much handled telegraph sheet with typewriting on one side. Perk showed sudden interest when he saw how his partner seemed startled and uttered an exclamation indicative of pleasure.

CHAPTER V

WHEN A COG SLIPPED

"What's up, partner?" demanded Perk who always admitted to being more or less curious-minded.

"Something I happened to pick up," replied Jack, grinning happily, "after that chap dived into his car and tore off down the street like a house afire."

"Huh! strikes me it looks kinder like a telegraph message buddy," Perk replied eagerly as if he began to smell something like a fire burning.

"Go up head boy, you said it," his mate told him. "Here, read what it says for yourself—you too, Cyclone, though it'll be Greek to you since you don't happen to know the gent who sent it to Cheyenne."

Perk glued his eager eyes to the yellow slip of paper and as he took in the printed words he held his breath—as if unable to fully grasp the whole meaning of the message with only one reading, he started again, this time going over it aloud.

"Adolph Barkus, 173 Evergreen Street,
"Cheyenne, Wyoming.

"Have received positive information they are in your city. Pay particular attention to the young flyer. Treat him with brotherly kindness and to please me take him for a nice, long ride. Keep me posted. Things down here in something of a snarl. Better drop in and report. I may need you the worst way.

"Kearns."

"Hot ziggetty dog! what d'ye think o' that measly rum-runner bobbin' up like a floatin' cork to annoy us again?"

Perk gave all the signs of annoyance — he clenched his fist, frowned most horribly and drew a long breath as though his feelings threatened to overwhelm him entirely.

"Oh! we landed that gent behind the bars all right," Jack remarked, taking things much more coolly than the excitable one, "but it's hard to keep a man with a big wad of long-green shut up—he hires a celebrated lawyer, gets out on heavy bail, has his case postponed on one account or another until witnesses disappear and the public forgets what it's all about. Like as not he's as free as either of us, only it may be he's forbidden to leave the State of Florida pending his

trial—you notice the message was dispatched from Jacksonville."

"From his getting on our track I kinder guess the gent must feel a bit peeved at the firm o' Ralston an' Perkiser. Brotherly kindness, eh?—take him for a nice long ride—how swell that'd be—an' all jest to please Mr. Oswald Kearns, the high light o' most o' the schemes hatched up to run in case goods from Bimimi along the Florida shore."

Then Perk forgot his indignation long enough to grin as though the humorous side of the case struck him.

"Such great luck I never did see," he burst out, "to think o' you pickin' up his telegram so pat after we'd kicked him an' his slinkin' pal off the lot. That's what I'd call incriminatin' evidence, partner and if ever the case is called an' we're sent down to Florida to tell 'bout our part o' the mess, this message ought to make the jury sit up an' take notice, sure as I'm born it ought."

"I'll keep it safe, you can well believe, Perk and I'm not bothering my head about those two sneaks for they're not apt to give us any further trouble after what happened to them tonight. When this Mr. Barkus discovers how he must have dropped his fine telegram, he'll suspect it fell into our hands and the chances are he'll give

us a wide berth the rest of our stay in this burg."

"Jest so Jack, an' let's hope we're goin' to climb out o' here right soon now. The dirty scoundrels — wantin' to give you a *ride,* was they? Which means in these days take a feller off into the country, knock him on the head an' dump him out on the road like he was a log. Zowie! times is out o' joint strikes me, when these pesky gangs think nothin' o' murderin' a man 'cause they don't like the color o' his necktie."

Cyclone had listened to this exchange of conversation between his two companions and the look on his face plainly told that he could not grasp what it was all about.

"I'd like to get a grip on what all this clatter's about, boys, if neither of you object. I ought to be starting back to Hollywood in the morning for they're shouting and sending hot wires telling me I'm holding up the show; but since I'm crazy to see that boat of yours, and you promised me a little gallop up among the clouds, I'm bound to wait over till afternoon, no matter what happens to the bunch on the Coast—they c'n use my understudy till I choose to lope along and be hanged to 'em. Now, what about putting me wise to the game that was sprung on you tonight?"

"Nothing to hinder our telling you what we ran up against down in Florida last winter,"

remarked Jack and as they settled back in their chairs in comfort he explained all about the mixup as recorded in the previous volume of this series.

Cyclone proved an attentive listener, eagerly drinking in the particulars—nodding his head approvingly at certain points that appealed especially to his discriminating mind until the finishing stroke had been laid bare when he jumped up to shake hands boisterously with both Jack and Perk and to give vent to his feelings in words.

"By the great horn spoon! so that's the bully sort of life you fellers in the Secret Service lead, is it?" he exclaimed with flashing eyes and an expression of eagerness on his enraptured face. "Some fine day, after I've had a few words with my director and told him where he gets off, I'll be hanged if I don't strike out for Washington and try to bore my way into the game you're following—suits my spirit to the dot—lots of adventure, fair pay and the thrill of turning back these smart alecs who think they own the world because they've got a speed boat and the jack to buy a load of hard stuff in the Bahamas that they figure on landing along our coast."

"That mightn't be such a bad idea, Cyclone, for a man built like you and who yearns for excitement," observed Jack sympathetically, for

he could understand just how the other must feel. "When you get to that point of kicking over the traces in the picture game let me know and perhaps I can speak a good word for you at Headquarters. They're always in need of the right sort of men. Remember that, will you, Cyclone?"

"You bet I will Jack, and I mean every word I say, too. I've never gone up in an airship yet, but the desire's been gripping me a heap lately and perhaps, after I make the try tomorrow morning, that you've so kindly promised me, the fever'll get so high I just won't be able to hold back any longer."

"That depends on how you come through your examination," Jack plainly explained. "A lot of boys have an itch to make the riffle, but are turned down because they lack some one of a dozen requirements that are positively essential these modern days to get a pilot's license. But as far as I can see, you ought to pass with flying colors—no joke intended either."

They sat there chatting for several hours. Cyclone's enthusiasm fairly bubbled over at times as he listened to some of the accounts of adventures that had befallen both Jack and Perk in days gone by.

"The more I hear from you boys the sicker I get over the way I'm wasting my young life with

foolish cowboy stunts and make believe fights in the pictures. It's pretty much a fake business and gets on my nerves—even many of the most thrilling scenes are fakes of the worst kind—pulling the wool over the eyes of the simple public. I got a notion I'm built for something that's genuine and not a fraud—when you lads get into a mess it's the real thing and you can put your heart in the action without a director yelling at you and ordering it all done over—sometimes as many as five times, till his royal highness is satisfied and you're all worn to a shred with the hard work. Bah! me for the open and a life of genuine adventure, every time."

"Je-ru-salem crickets! but you have got it bad, partner!" croaked Perk grinning happily as he spoke. "Goin' are you, Cyclone?—well, we'll pick you up about nine on the way to the flyin' field. So-long—mighty glad we run across you tonight and had a chance to see how you work them fists o' yourn. The Service could make good use o' a few real scrappers and I'd say the chance o' you buttin' in is gilt-edged."

So closed a day that was not without its redeeming features, even Perk being satisfied that things were moving along the line of adventure and excitement.

CHAPTER VI

CYCLONE PROVES GAME

In the morning after they had partaken of a late breakfast, Jack and his pal stepped around the corner to get a taxi, pick up Cyclone as per arrangement and proceed out to the flying field.

"For one thing," Perk was remarking as they stepped gaily along, "we ain't noticed any sign o' them gringoes we licked so neat last night. Guess they had their little tummies filled up with excitement and right now may be rubbin' arnica on their hurts. Wow! but I'd hate to've got them socks Cyclone passed on to his party—must have near broke his nose for I saw his face was gettin' fair bloody when he was snatched up and tossed into the car."

They found the ex-fighter and cow puncher waiting anxiously for them, he having been abroad early and had his customary morning meal. Later on they arrived at the landing field and found everything "okay" as Perk put it. He had confessed to a little anxiety concerning the safety of their ship but the man they had hired

to stand guard had not seen or heard anything suspicious during the entire night.

"Huh! guess they feel too blamed sore this mornin' to be up an' around," was the sensible conclusion arrived at by Perk after his fears had been dissipated and in this summing up of the conditions he was seconded by Jack, likewise their mutual friend, Cyclone Davis.

It was Jack's custom to always have his ship in condition for an immediate flight—there could be no telling how soon an order might reach them giving directions for a hasty takeoff with their goal any old place as Perk was accustomed to remarking off-hand.

Consequently there was always a full tank of gas on board together with plenty of lubricating oil and all manner of essential things so necessary to a successful flight. Of course, as a rule they could drop down at some wayside landing field for the purpose of replenishing their stores since the whole country was becoming dotted with such necessary places, some of them gorgeously fitted up with everything in the way of landing lights, extra hangars for visiting ships and even service plants for supplying gasoline with little effort.

Cyclone displayed no actual concern as he was secured in his seat by a stout leather strap, hav-

ing also had the parachute harness fastened to his back. He watched every move of his two experienced companions with eagerness and asked not a few pertinent questions, thus showing his desire to know all there was connected with the flying game.

Then the pilot gave her the gun and they started to move along with constantly accelerated speed until presently Jack lifted his charge and they no longer found themselves in contact with the earth but mounting toward the blue sky overhead.

Up, up they climbed with great spirals marking their course—the earth below began to lose its individual proportions and looked like an immense checkerboard to the thrilled cowpuncher.

Cyclone could be seen twisting his head this way and that, eager to see everything. Perk, noting this, nodded his head as though feeling positive the other was going to fall in love with flying. Dashing across the plains on a cow pony, pursued by made-up Indians and all that regular sort of stuff must seem mighty tame to him after moving through the air at the rate of possibly a hundred and fifty miles an hour with the motor and propeller keeping up a constant roaring sound and all with the consciousness that he was several miles above the earth, amidst floating

fleecy clouds, with even the high-flying eagle far, far beneath.

Jack took special pains to give the ambitious comrade such a ride as he could never have imagined, even in his wildest dreams—he put the new boat through all manner of ordinary stunts, even turning over so that they kept going ahead at a fair pace while flying upside-down—he went through dizzy revolutions, banked sharply and carried on generally as skillful pilots seem to take great delight in doing.

All this never seemed to bother Cyclone a particle—perhaps his experience as a cowboy may have assisted him to meet the numerous thrills without quailing.

Of course he could not talk with either of his friends for hearing was next to impossible since Jack was not making use of the silencer that had been made a part of the "furniture" of the new ship—but he nodded his head joyfully whenever he found Perk watching him with a question in his eye.

The two pilots had their head-phones in position, for they would no doubt like to hold communication from time to time. Thus it happened that Jack, chancing to think of something, addressed his chum.

"Forgot to ask you whether they'd learned any-

thing about our lost friend, Buddy Warner—how about it, Perk?"

The other mechanically shook his head in the negative.

"Nothing doin' along them lines, sorry to say partner," he explained. "To be sure there was a'plenty o' rumors, but the paper said nobody had learned a blamed thing that'd stand the wash. Afraid Buddy's gone under an' that the on'y thing left to do is to come across his crashed boat in some canyon off there in the Rockies. Tough, all right, but then us flyers jest got to look at sech mishaps as all in the line o' duty—it's like bein' a soldier all over again, ready to start out mornin's without a ghost o' an idee we'll be back to eat another meal or write a last letter home."

"I'm mighty sorry to hear that, Perk. Buddy was a fine boy and everybody liked him. That old mother of his, too, it may be the death of her. Hurts to feel that no matter how many pilots may be scouring the land they just can't seem to dig up even a little clue to tell where he dropped out of sight and never was heard from again—not even a flower could be dropped on his grave if they wanted to."

Jack had taken a wild ride through cloudland, going something like two hundred miles and

then swinging around to make the return trip after that he had climbed to a ceiling of somethink like twenty thousand feet until they were all shivering with the frigid air. Still Cyclone never flinched—indeed, he did not even display the slightest inclination to beg Jack to drop down where it was warmer—in fact he showed all the signs of one who would eventually make an exceptionally good flyer, could he but pass his examination successfully.

It was close to high noon when they landed after the most thrilling morning in all Cyclone's checkered life. Before he said goodbye to his two pals he squeezed their hands, and with a face illumined said in his determined way:

"Me for a pilot's license, boys and when I've done my fifty hours of solo flying and get my papers, behold me making a bee-line for Washington and breaking into Uncle Sam's Secret Service corps. I'm a fade-out as a movie actor, and I feel that my star of destiny calls on me to be a cloud chaser, getting after law breakers in the air across the land from the Atlantic seaboard to the Gold Coast; ditto on the sea to the ends of the earth. Wish me luck, fellows and here's hoping that some day we'll all be pals in a great game. If ever you get to Los Angeles drop in and see me at Hollywood—if I'm still on deck and doing my little stunts rescuing fair maidens

and beating the villains black and blue—all in your eye, boys."

They were sorry to see him go, for Cyclone had turned out to be a most enjoyable companion as Jack told Perk more than a few times.

Since the morning flight had covered so much in the way of stunt flying, speed testing and altitude climbing, Jack decided there was hardly any necessity for their going out again in the afternoon. So they figured on taking things comfortably in their room, catching up with their sadly neglected correspondence, and even getting in a nap or two while waiting for their usual supper hour to come along.

The sun was well down in the western heavens when a knock on their door caused Jack to answer it. Perk could hear him speaking to the lady from whom they hired the room, then Jack came back examining a yellow bit of paper, meanwhile giving Perk a peculiar look that somehow caused the other to jump up excitedly and exclaim:

"Hot ziggetty dog! that strikes me like a wire, partner, tell me, has our order to strike out and get busy come along—gee whiz! I'm trembling all over with eagerness to know what our next line's goin' to be!"

CHAPTER VII

THEY ARE OFF!

Jack lost no time in answering the pleading look in Perk's eyes.

"Order's come at last, brother and we're due to skip out of this burg just as soon as we can get a bite to eat."

"Where to, Jack—north, east, south or west?" babbled the pleased Perk.

"Looks like it might be the last you named," he was told.

"And if it ain't a dead secret would you mind tellin' me what sort of a jaunt we're pushed on to this time—is it to be a hunt, partner?"

"I'd say it was, and with a vengeance too," admitted Jack, still holding his chum over imaginary hot coals in that he declined to hasten with the information so urgently desired.

"So that's all settled, hey? And what are we supposed to be huntin', if it's just the same to you to cough up that necessary information—more rum-chasers—bogus money-makers—check raisers, mebbe—runaway cashier with all the bank funds—which is it buddy?"

"Never came within a mile of the right answer," Jack assured him with one of his puzzling smiles. "Fact is, it's a pilot we're ordered to fetch in."

"Pilot—say, do we have to shoot out to sea after a steamship that's carried off its harbor pilot—such rotten luck, when we expected something real big to take up our time and labor—shucks!"

"Wait, you jump at conclusions all too soon, Perk my boy. There happen to be several other kinds of pilots besides those who fetch ocean steamships in and out of New York harbor or the Golden Gate at San Francisco—for instance those on river steamboats, it might be, or those of airplanes!"

"Airships did you say, Jack?" roared Perk, his eyes widening while he clutched the hand that held the telegram as though tempted to try and read the printed words he could just manage to see upon the sheet.

"Yes, air-mail pilot in the bargain," Jack fired at him.

"Hot ziggetty dog! do you mean a *missing* mail pilot and his name is——"

"Buddy Warner—that's right Perk, no other."

The most ecstatic expression imaginable crossed the face of the amiable Perk to proclaim better than any words could ever tell just what

he thought of the great news he had just heard.

"I'm *so* glad, partner — nobody could've fetched me better news than what you're telling me right now. If I was asked what I'd like best to do—jest what line o' work I'd be crazy to handle, I'd say it was to take a look in at every pesky canyon and sinkhole along the mountain ranges in hopes o' findin' that fine lad an' fetch him back home to his old mammy. And now you're givin' me my best wish right off the bat. Go on an' tell me what it says, that wire they sent you."

"That we are to drop anything and everything else and start out to help find Buddy Warner; they must think a heap of that mail pilot for our Boss to issue such a broad order as that. It means we've got to jump off before night sets in and head for the western town where he was last seen. It also means we'll be on the job for days, or anyway until we get orders it's no use combing the gullies and ravines and canyons any longer for the missing pilot must be dead."

"Can't strike off any too soon to please me, Jack. I'd even go without any grub if by saving an hour we could have a better chance o' strikin' pay dirt an' turnin' him up alive."

"No such desperate hurry as all that," the other assured him to put a quietus on his nervous desire to be winging their way toward the scene

of all the excitement and thus add one more ship to the flotilla already seeking information concerning the whereabouts of the missing mail pilot. Also, Perk, as nobody knows when we may get another chance to eat, it would be wise for us to take advantage of the present opportunity as well as lay in a little grub for emergencies. For all any one can say to the contrary it may be our hard luck to get caught in an air pocket and take a tumble just as Buddy probably did when such things would come in mighty handy. I'm leaving that little task for you to handle, Perk, because you're right clever when it's grub that's needed."

"Yeah, I always aim to be that way an' I take it as a compliment you're payin' me when you talk that way. Nobody c'n amount to thirty cents when he hasn't stoked his engine properly with fuel."

"I don't know whether you're on to it or not, brother," pursued Jack as they began to hastily assemble their few possessions preparatory to stepping out; "but I've been clipping every account I could find in the papers you fetched home, covering Buddy's dropping out of sight."

"Huh! I sure did take notice of the fact, but never dreamin' we'd have a peep-in at this wide search. I jest guessed you was enough int'rested to want to compare these here wise-cracks about

the cause o' his trouble with what it really must a'been, in case they found the remains o' his crate in some canyon or gully."

"That was one reason," admitted Jack candidly, "but somehow, though I never let on to you, I seemed to have a sort of feeling we might be working on that mystery sooner or later—you might call it an *inspiration* and let it go at that."

"Glory be Jack, an' what have you got in that wise coco o' yourn, if it's all right for you to up an' spill the game?"

"Some time while we're on our way," the other explained just as if he had the thing all laid out, even to the smallest particulars, "while you're running the ship, I mean to go carefully over those newspaper reporters' accounts and try to figure out just what could have happened to bring about Buddy's disappearance—also, find what sort of weather he must have struck right after jumping off from his last port of call to drop mail sacks and pick up others."

Perk thereupon wagged his head as though he began to understand what a skillful way his chum had of getting at the "meat in the cocoanut."

"No wildcat skirmishin', an' beatin' about the bush for *you,* eh partner?" he blurted out in sincere admiration. "An' I'd wager all I got in

my jeans you're bound to hit on the real facts when everything's figgered up."

"Don't be too sure about that brother," advised Jack, shaking his head as he spoke, "I'll certainly do my level best, but you never can tell how the cat's going to jump. It's one thing to theorize and quite another to hit on what's the truth. I'll try and separate the wheat from the chaff and by degrees build up a little story of my own that may, and again may not, cover the ground. Now let's clear out of this after we've paid our landlady what we owe for our room, and thank her for being so kind to a couple of forlorn bachelor flyers."

This was soon done and shortly afterwards they sat down to have a last meal in their favorite restaurant, Perk meanwhile having laid in a certain amount of supplies in the way of such food as they could take care of while on the wing.

Then they hastened to the flying field to have their ship hauled out of the hangar, tuned up for the last time and give them an opportunity to "kick-off," as Perk was pleased to call it, before darkness fell.

Perk secretly had been entertaining a little fear lest at the last minute something not down on the bills might spring a leak and bring about an unfortunate delay in their departure—so much time had already passed since the disappearance of the

air-mail pilot that another six or ten hours must seem deplorable—but fortunately nothing untoward came along. The ship was trundled to a nearby point where Jack figured they should take off, basing his decision on the way the wind happened to be blowing and after a brief examination they pronounced their air steed to be in perfect trim.

Jack shook hands with the late guardian of their plane as he slipped an extra bill into his possession so too, did Perk thank him warmly concerning the way he had performed his duty for since those enemies had failed in their attempt to "take them for a ride," it had always been possible for them to cripple the new cloud chaser so that something dreadful was likely to happen when they were a mile from the ground.

Nothing now remained for them to do save settle down in their seats—they had donned their dungarees, fixed their helmets and chute packs and in other ways prepared for a long flight into the west. Already it had grown dusk, although the sun could not be far down below the horizon and very likely they would glimpse his smiling face again when they had climbed toward cloudland so Jack gave her the gun and with a roar they sped down the field.

CHAPTER VIII

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

Just as they had expected they soon glimpsed the descending sun when they had attained a certain altitude and at the same time the earth far below was almost lost to sight, since the night haze was settling down.

Perk, having nothing else of importance to do, was arranging their headphone apparatus so that in case they wished to make any sort of talk it could be readily carried out in spite of the continuous clamor surrounding them. This new ship was also supplied with that recent invention known as a silencer—long used in connection with firearms by the way, and now applied to the motor of a plane with successful results—Jack had not thought it necessary to bring it into play since it retarded the speed of the ship to some extent and there was no necessity for demanding a cessation of the dreadful clatter and droning.

Jack had headed directly into the west as soon as their craft attained a sufficient altitude. He had his chart on the airways well studied, and knew just where and when they could strike a line

of beacons, such as have been arranged for air mail pilots in their night journeys to and fro with their complement of letter sacks and possibly express matter.

After a short interval the sun disappeared even for these high flyers and the stars gradually began to dot the blue heavens overhead.

"If you don't mind Perk," the head pilot was saying, as he turned on his cabin light, "I'd like you to take her over for a spell. Somehow I'm anxious to go over those clippings and make a start at laying out our plan of campaign. We've got nothing as yet to go by except what those newspaper boys gathered up so as to spin their fairy yarns—later we're bound to strike pay dirt on our own account, and can do a little building with a foundation of real stuff, not speculation and romance behind it."

That suited Perk to a fraction, for truth to tell he was floundering in a bog himself, not knowing how they were to get down to "hard pan" and be able to lay out their course with some show of reason. He had become quite adept at the old dodge of "leave it to George" and filled with confidence in his chum's ability to handle any sort of situation, he believed he displayed more or less wisdom in not attempting to wrestle with mysteries beyond his limited capacity.

For a long time Jack read on, tore up a number

of the slips of newspaper stuff, laid others aside as if for a second application, made a number of notes on a little pad he kept handy and seemed so much in earnest that Perk kept tabs of his actions with glistening eyes. In his mind Jack already must have "struck oil" and doubtless arrived at some specious solution of the riddle that had the entire country guessing—what had happened to Buddy Warner, the best liked air-mail pilot in the whole region west of the Mississippi—where had he crashed—was he still alive or had he followed the long line of famous flyers who had "gone west" after attempting to put through some dazzling exploit that would have brought immortal fame if only it had succeeded?

All this while the plane roared on, slipping through space at the rate of something close to a hundred and twenty miles an hour for this was an occasion when speed meant everything. Perk too rejoiced in handling the throttle of an up-to-date ship that put it all over the ancient type of plane which he had been wont to employ when going forth so flippantly to offer battle to those pestering Hun pilots when the war was on in France.

"Hot ziggetty dog partner! You sure have had a big session with them news articles an' I notice how you threw a heap o' them overboard like they didn't 'mount to a row o' beans."

Perk said this when he saw Jack shake his head as though he might be somewhat puzzled and needed more or less reflection so as to straighten things out.

"After all, I didn't get even half as much genuine information from the bunch as I hoped I would," the other told him, though there was no hint of bitter disappointment in his manner of speaking, only disgust that so much could be written, founded on such minute real facts. "These newspaper boys can spin the most gorgeous yarns on a speck of truth—it's their business to stretch things to the breaking point you know, partner, and they sure do that. All that I discarded and threw over the side was just chaff, without a single sound kernel of wheat in it. When later on, after I've had time to digest things a bit when I go over what's left, chances are there'll be another sheaf of clippings go bad and be tossed out. Some of those stories were the bunk, made up in the reporter's skillful brain out of nothing at all, even if interesting to the general reader. In these days the story's the main thing editors demand."

"Yeah! I kinder guessed that way myself," remarked Perk, trying hard to seem disgusted, "though I own up they did make what you might call interestin' readin' that might pull the wool over the eyes o' most folks. An' what did you

think was the worst story in the bunch, Jack old hoss?"

"I don't know if you read it, Perk, for it was in a paper I bought myself and which you hadn't seen," Jack told him.

"Seems to me I do 'member you fetched one home and I lost track o' it in all the rush an bustle, Jack. Tear in an' tell a feller what it all was about, won't you?"

"This was a letter received from a pilot who had formerly worked on the same shift as Buddy Warner—it went on to broadly hint the boy had some kind of secret enemy and was deeply concerned—the writer of the letter couldn't say positively what sort of trouble the missing pilot was up against, but declared it his belief that Buddy had met with some kind of foul play—that this other person might be interested in Buddy's disappearance!"

"Rats! I don't like the way he put that stuff over!" scoffed Perk with considerable indignation and concern. "Clean as a hound's tooth that was Buddy Warner and every one who knew him would say the same. I don't believe the cub had an enemy in the world—I'd call that a nasty makeup o' a crooked yarn."

"I'm with you there brother," said Jack firmly. "But you can understand how eager some people are to get into print—they see an opening to

break into some matter that's gripped the public attention and just yearn to share in the spotlight. We'll have a chance to dig out the truth for ourselves before a great while, if any sort of luck helps us to grab the right cards."

Jack thereupon put away the few clippings he had kept and was soon in charge of the stick while his partner occupied himself with some of the ordinary duties pertaining to the observer and navigator of a double-seat air craft when on the wing.

The motor continued to function to a point close to perfection, showing how marvelous the skill of those mechanics to whom the task of building an engine fitted for the work of driving a heavier than air ship at an amazing pace through space must be.

The more Jack and Perk saw of their new boat, the higher their sincere admiration soared. If ever perfection was reached in such things it surely must have been when they put this engine together with an accuracy that compared favorably with the works of the finest and most expensive watch that ever came out of Switzerland.

"No necessity for both of us to stick it out when the going is as smooth as it is right now," suggested Jack, "later on we may strike rough sledding when both of us will have to keep on deck for many hours. Suppose Perk, you curl

up and take a snooze. I'll promise to wake you up inside of three hours when you can take charge while I hit the hay—how about that arrangement, boy?"

"Oh! it's okay any old way with me, partner," replied the other readily enough for truth to tell Perk was commencing to yawn and show other signs of being sleepy, though he would willingly have stayed on the job until morning had there been any necessity for doing so.

"Just ten p. m. right now brother—about half-past twelve, then, I'll give you a nudge which will mean your watch has arrived while I get a couple of hours off duty to freshen up. Everything looks up to snuff so far buddy, and let's hope it will keep on that way right along."

So Perk settled down as comfortably as the limited accommodations allowed while Jack continued to watch his indicators on the black dashboard and by the exercise of continual care avoid such traps as tricky air pockets, such as might fall in their way.

CHAPTER IX

THE THREATENING CRASH

As time passed Jack continued to sit there in charge, frequently glancing over the side to see if there were any signs of the swirling beacons especially designed to assist air mail pilots on their way to some distant goal.

He had figured out that they must, sooner or later, come upon the line of such beacons and once found it would not be very difficult to continue following them during the balance of the night.

In the end he was greatly pleased to discover a faint light ahead — in about ten seconds he glimpsed it again and when this happened for the third time his last doubt was removed.

As he passed far above the revolving light he changed his course a little knowing the points of the compass the line of beacons followed, he must set out to follow them for unless he managed to do the right thing he could not possibly come across the next whirling glow.

Three, four of the friendly lights designated as "guide-posts of the air" he passed and all

seemed going just as he would wish, when there came a sudden and unwelcome change.

Perk, sleeping just behind the pilot, felt something come in contact with his arm and he instinctively understood it was Jack giving him the prearranged nudge to let him know his rest period had expired and that it was up to him to take his turn at the controls.

"Huh! I get you, partner," he mumbled, not yet thoroughly aroused, "watchman, how goes the night, eh Jack, old hoss?"

"Not so good," the other told him.

"I swan now, if this ain't a punk deal!" ventured Perk, in a tone of injured innocence, "when did this beat in on us, buddy?"

"It's just plain undulterated fog," Jack told him in a matter-of-fact tone as though such a thing was to be expected in a night's run where every possible type of country, from prairie to mountains, could be met up with and the contrary streams of air were favorable to heavy fogs.

Perk first of all took a single look over the side.

"Ginger pop! a reg'lar pea-soup that's been dished up for us, it sure is, partner!" he exclaimed, the head phones still being in use so that talking was no trouble at all even though the racket all around was deafening.

"Some fog, that's right Perk," admitted the

unmoved pilot "the one you're mixed up with always does seem to be the worst ever."

"How long we been kickin' through this mess?" demanded Perk.

"Oh, something like half an hour more or less I figure," said Jack.

"An' it's now jest three in the mornin'—meanin' some two and a half more hours before the first peep o' day."

He leaned forward, the better to survey the altitude dial in order to learn how high Jack had been flying.

"Four thousand feet an' more, eh?" Perk remarked, "I guess that might be fairly safe, unless there happened to be a stiff mountain range standin' across our course. Want me to keep that right along, Boss?"

"For another half hour and then we've got to climb as far again—can't take any chance in a mess like this—I've always got that Transcontinental Air Transport liner, the *San Francisco* in my mind when I strike into a heavy fog."*

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*September, 1929, this wonderful up-to-date giant air liner with eight persons aboard, became lost in a storm and fog and crashed headlong into a rocky cliff in the Black Rock Valley, some twenty-six miles from Gallup, New Mexico, exploded and burned with a total loss of ship, crew and five passengers. The tragedy of this once volcanic district sent a wave of horror throughout the entire country and proved a setback to the cause of aviation. Jack only voiced the feelings of nearly every pilot in saying what he did.

Perk made a queer sound with his lips as if to indicate that his feelings ran along the same groove. Indeed, many an air pilot has had that same terrible tragedy flash before him when plunging onward through an opaque wall of fog, unable to even see his own wingtips.

"I'm on partner," said Perk as he took over the stick. "Meanin' to get seven winks o' sleep, ain't you?"

"Not just now," responded Jack, "truth is I'm not a bit sleepy so I'll just take things easy and do some thinking while you run the ship."

"Expected to meet up with some muck like this I guess, eh, partner?"

"Sure did Perk, only not quite so soon," came the undisturbed reply. "It seems there's been an unusual amount of dirty weather out this way lately and we've just slammed into this fog as a feeler. About four, start to head toward that higher ceiling—no particular hurry I'd say, according to the chart."

"Okay Boss, I got you," with which Perk relapsed in silence while the plane continued to speed along with its monotonous roar and hum.

If anything the fog was growing thicker, Perk made up his mind, although he really had nothing to afford any comparison since they were completely shut in as by a circular wall, not even a solitary star being in evidence and certainly

not the faintest glimmer of a moving beacon down below where the unseen earth lay.

At such a time as this the air pilot finds himself depending wholly on the accuracy of his instruments, backed by his ability to read them without the slightest error. Perk was well up in all this and had no doubt of his judgment in carrying on. Flying blind is what these gallant sailors of the airways call such a condition, though the only recognition of the encompassing danger is a cutting down of their swift pace.

The consequent thrill that accompanies such a voyage through a sea of fog comes to every pilot; although in time they become so accustomed to the conditions that it fails to affect them as in the beginning. Should the bravest of men, though a beginner in aviation, ever experience such a wild night ride through space and heavy fog it would give him a sense of anticipation that could come through no other source, whether on sea or land.

Once, when there chanced to be a little change in the scant night breeze, Perk lifted his head as if to listen but before he could decide whether he had actually heard something or had been deceived by a strut snapping back, the feeble air again fell away and left him groping in ignorance, not wholly satisfied, yet unable to find anything on which to hang a conjecture.

"Rats! you must be away off your base Perk," he told himself chidingly, "huh! not a ghost o' a chance in ten thousand—yet it sure did sound like a ship in action. Must be hearin' things again in the night."

He had slackened the pace somewhat, thinking of that dreadful crash down amidst the lava beds of the wildest country in the whole Southwest, mind pictures that made him willing to consider safety first before speed. Perhaps it was fate that made Perk for once conquer that reckless spirit of his for there could be no telling what the consequences might have been otherwise.

Again he lifted his head and assumed the strained attitude that went with listening intently—the roar of their engine's exhaust seemed to eclipse any other sound and as if seized with a sudden inspiration, Perk reached out and brought the silencer into play. This had an immediate effect—and then too it caused Jack to take notice, for he called out:

"What's the big idea partner—trying things out are you?"

"Listen, Jack—don't you hear it ahead there?" almost shrieked the one at the stick.

A few seconds passed during which Jack must have been straining his ears to the utmost. Then he gave a cry that bubbled forth in a mixture of incredulity and alarm—the only time on rec-

ord that Perk could remember Jack showing such an unusual emotion.

"It's a ship, Perk!" he shrilled.

"You bet it is!" echoed the other, dismay in his thick voice.

"Dead ahead of us too and bearing this way," continued Jack as the portentious sounds grew louder with each passing second. Their own motor had been throttled down to a mere whisper and thus any other sound was due to be heard.

A few more dreadful seconds passed with that throbbing sound growing more and more threatening.

"Must be the east bound air mail!" Jack hastily exclaimed, "make a nose dive partner, and in a hurry too, for she's right on us!"

CHAPTER X

FLYING BLIND

Instantly the head of the ship was pointed downward and they started to coast—even as this maneuvre was in progress and the roar became deafening, both of them caught a fragmentary glimpse of bright lights passing just overhead.

It had indeed been a close shave, for only that Perk proved so clever at the stick they must have met the mail ship head on with the inevitable result that yet another tragedy of the air would be chronicled in the morning newspapers with scare headlines fully an inch high.

Perk had lost his voice due to the sudden nerve strain and even ordinarily cool Jack Ralston waited a brief spell, in order to insure proper breathing before trying to speak.

"Reckon you got all the thrill you could stand that time, Perk!" he finally remarked with a little quiver in his voice.

"Beat anything I ever stacked up against—that's right partner," Perk frankly admitted, doubtless taking in a deep breath of relief.

"Never might happen again in twenty years," said Jack, as if that feature of the near tragedy affected him most of all. "With all this wide space all around us, just to think of two airships heading straight at each other in a fog—who says now we're not watched over by a special Providence?"

"You said it buddy," Perk agreed. "That sure was a time when that muffler paid a big interest on its cost an' I kinder guess saved our lives in the bargain. It pays to advertise an' also to pick up the newest fixin's along the line o' aviation discoveries an' inventions."

"Just so Perk. If our engine had kept thundering away right along we might not have been warned in time to get out of the road and let that stunt-flying air mail pilot squeeze past. He ought to be reported for hustling along like that in such a thick soup; but since we're still alive and kicking, I reckon we'll just have to let it drop at that."

"Mebbe you're right there, Jack old bean—strikes me we were hittin' it up like hot cakes in the bargain an' not so innocent after all. I'm a'wonderin' if he got wind o' the close call he had—must have lamped our lights as we ducked and went down like a bullet or the stick o' a rocket that'd exploded up near the stars. Shucks! I'd jest like to meet up with that guy sometime

an' ask him what his feelin' was—bet you he was as scart as we felt when he whizzed right over our heads."

"It might be the part of wisdom to climb to a higher level now, partner," hinted Jack. "Unless I miss my guess that chap was dropping, as if he'd come down from the upper regions, which gives me an idea he knew where he was and had been keeping a big ceiling so as to avoid butting into some mountain peak."

"Here goes then," and with the words Perk commenced to climb, the new ship being so constructed as to be a great improvement over the old type of plane, able to ascend at a steep angle without any of those formerly necessary laborious spirals.

At the height of four thousand feet he again leveled off and kept to the course Jack had marked out. Perhaps they were over some air mail line with its friendly flashing beacons winking far below; but that deadly wall of fog lying under their keel effectually prevented them from taking advantage of any such guide posts along the way; nor would it have availed them greatly could they have dropped down to within a few hundred feet of the earth, for even at such a distance it must have been utterly out of the question for the keenest vision to have picked up a beacon or even detect its flash because of

the curtain that fairly smothered them on all sides, above and below.

They no longer conversed, even Perk understanding how serious their condition must be and holding his usually ready tongue in check, while Jack took it out in tense thinking, watching the various dials and figuring just which way they would be going in case of drift.

So half an hour crept by, with no change whatever in the conditions by which they were surrounded. It was now growing most unbearable, so monotonous, so very tiresome. A heavy fog is hard enough to bear at any time but when it stretches along hour after hour, without the slightest sign of any diminuation, it is bound to get on the stoutest nerves and produce symptoms bordering on a panic.

"Perhaps we might find some relief if we kept going up," suggested Jack after some time had passed. "It sort of stifles me to keep in such a thick mess as this, growing worse all the while."

"Huh, if I wasn't jest thinkin' that way myself partner," Perk declared, thus showing that it was a case of "me too."

They kept on climbing, although neither could discover much difference in that miserable opaque blanket. It began to grow much colder too, although they managed to don some heavier

coats which would keep them from feeling the change in weather conditions to any extent.

"Don't seem to be much use I guess Perk, in all my experience I can't say I ever ran across a fog that extended such a distance above the earth. Most times you can get out of the ditch by climbing, but here we are at a thirteen thousand foot ceiling and it's as black as ever. No use trying to get above the line—it just can't be done."

"Right you are partner," admitted Perk, leveling off, "though I must say the breathin' seems a shade easier than down below."

"We'll stick it out here for a while," Jack went on to say, "and it may be that the coming dawn may bring some sort of a breeze along to scatter this beastly stuff and let us see what's what."

"Anyway," Perk was saying, as if in relief, "at such a height we ain't likely to rub noses with any rock pinnacle and to our everlastin' grief in the bargain. The air's like enough free of mountain peaks around this section o' country, which is some comfort to a fog-bound pair o' ginks, I admit."

It was by this time about five o'clock and Perk was banking heavily on the fact that inside of another half hour, at that extreme height, they were likely to discover the advance couriers of

approaching dawn commencing to paint the eastern heavens with fingers of delicate shaded colors.

"Got any sort o' idee where we might be right now, Jack?"

"Why, sitting tight in a nice fog blanket I'd say, brother," replied the one who was now at the controls, having some time back made the exchange, easily enough accomplished without the necessity of changing seats.

"Jokin' aside, Jack, I mean what section o' country might be away down below-stairs where there's land and green things—how I'd like to rest my tired peepers on somethin' *green* for a change."

"I'm not as sure of my figures as I'd like to be Perk, for it's been hours since we saw anything at all except this fog; but we've covered a lot of space and must be well on our way to the hunting ground we started for. Wait until we get out of this mess and then it can be settled as soon as we strike any town, village or even hamlet, that'll give us a hint concerning our bearings."

"I'm bothered a little bit just the same," complained Perk.

"What about, old pal?" demanded Jack quickly.

"What if somethin' should happen to our ship

—we're a long way from any place an' well, 'fore you took over the stick Jack, seemed to me there was a bit o' a holdup to the slick way the boat had been whooping things up—I might a'been mistaken, but she seemed to be wallowin' some, like she didn't just feel pleased over the cargo she had to carry."

"Perk, now that you mention it I do believe you're right—I'm not pushing her much, but she does act sort of sulky, as if tired of this thing —not that we could blame her for feeling that way. Tell you what, partner — suppose you climb out and take a look around to see if everything seems okay."

Accordingly Perk, as if sensing some hidden motive in what the other had just remarked, left his seat and made his way out to the port wing—the ship was swaying more or less, dipping and nosing upward as Jack held her to it, but Perk being quite accustomed to such things had no trouble whatever. A minute later and he came hurrying back to attach his earphones again and cry out in a tone filled with more or less excitement:

"Jack, there is something the matter for sure—fact is there's ice formin' on both wings, and right heavy at that!"

CHAPTER XI

AN UNSOLVED MYSTERY

"Take over the stick again Perk," said Jack, apparently not very much astounded by the serious information his mate had just given him, "I think I'd like to have a look myself; I've never had any great trouble with ice since I've not been much of a hand to soar up twenty or thirty thousand feet for an altitude record. Nothing much to worry about partner. At the worst we will have to drop lower down so the warmer air will melt the stuff. A ship like this can stand considerable in the way of a cargo, though it isn't just the proper caper to stow the load on the wings—far better to have it somewhere inside the fuselage. Here goes!"

Whereupon Jack crawled out of the cabin and started to make a close investigation while Perk did the honors along the steering line, more or less eager to hear his mate's report when he came back from his little tour.

"It's all right brother," he heard Jack saying, even before the other regained his customary front seat—"nothing to bother about and we'll

soon knock spots out of what ice has already gathered. Pretty snappy out here, I notice. We'll drop down to a more comfy level and take chances with being suffocated by that gruelly stuff. Go to it sonny, I'm inside the safety line."

Down they went in long slides one after another until the thirteen thousand became ten, then seven and there Jack told his comrade to "hold everything" and cut down the speed a bit.

"Daylight's about due I figure," he observed, "and once we cut loose from this blank curtain and pick up some visibility, we'll not have to feel nervous about some of those rocky snags that lie in ambush to impale venturesome aviators when off their course and lost in a maze.

Perk soon afterward realized that what his mate had remarked must be true, for sure enough over in the east he could manage to detect some faint signs of a break in the hitherto impenetrable gloom surrounding them, positive evidence of the fact that morning was "just around the corner."

"What's more," Perk told himself, in jubiliation, "I guess now I c'n feel a little waft o' a breeze startin' up. Soon as that gets goin' it's goodbye to Mister Fog. Whew! mebbe I won't be tickled pink when that's come to pass cause I'm crazy to set eyes on dear old Mother Earth again. Yes sir, the pesky old fog is commencin'

to move out—jest keep it up, for you never will be missed."

"All over but the shouting Perk," remarked Jack just then as if he could have understood the tenor of the other's thoughts. "Inside of another half hour we'll be free from the stuff—wow! I never want to run through such a siege as this again, particularly in this wild Western country where peaks are in the majority and every one looking to stab some poor wandering airship."

"I kinder guess you're itchin' to get our bearings again Jack?" asked the walking question mark who was never really happy except when in a position to toss queries at some one.

"Naturally so," Jack told him point blank. "We had to get twisted up more or less during that drive through fogland, and the sooner I can pick up my bearings the better I'll be pleased. If you ask me offhand where we might be, I'd say within a few hundred miles of the spot where Buddy Warner took off on his last trip."

"Good enough!" crowed Perk, "nothin' like making things fly when you're about it—no beatin 'around the bush for us, partner. Then if we pick our course as per the information that leaked from that airport where he left his mail sack an' took on another batch, why we might begin to keep a watchful eye on the ground in

hopes o' makin' some sorter discovery—is that right?"

"You can begin using the glasses just as soon as we get our first glimpse of green spots below. Later on we'll drop down until we're not more than three hundred feet, more or less, above the treetops—if there are any tall trees in this section of country, which might be a question—possibly nothing in that line but scrub oaks, mesquite and the like, stunted stuff that grows on many western mountains and in rocky canyons."

Perk was in a little heaven of his own later on when calling out that he could distinctly see the ground, thanks to his binoculars.

Morning had come, with the sun well above the horizon and everything indicating they had a fair day ahead as frequently happens after a heavy fog. It was a wild stretch of country now spread beneath the sky voyagers, with all manner of lofty peaks in every direction, mountain ranges running criss-cross without the faintest sign of regularity.

"I swan if I'd care to be lost down in that sort o' country," Perk was saying as he continued to stare with great eagerness. "Jest about like huntin' for a needle in a haystack as to 'spect to find a cracked bus in all that awful scramble."

"Oh! we haven't got to where the trail is warm yet, partner," Jack informed him, "though of

course it isn't going to do any harm for you to scour the ground as we cut along. When a thing's lost, the chances are it happens to be lying just where nobody suspects—I've found that out myself more than a few times."

"Yeah! jest so Boss," grunted the one who handled the binoculars, "an' if we fall down on the job it ain't goin' to be from not usin' our eyes to the limit. But say, things keep on pilin' up worse than I ever ran across in all my whole life —look at what's ahead there—can you beat it, Jack?"

"Pretty tough stretch of mountain land any way you take it," said Jack as he swept his eyes around from right to left, "but fortunately we have nothing to worry about as long as we keep a fairly decent ceiling. Fact is, I'd call it free-going up here, with a nice cool breeze knocking on our port quarter and not hindering us any, even if it doesn't push us along."

"That's right, Jack—after that boring through a fog belt hundreds o' miles wide, this does seem like a little bit o' Heaven on earth. Mebbe you've noticed me takin 'a look all around once in a while—up in the air, I mean? Somehow I've been wonderin' why we haven't glimpsed a single ship since sun-up."

"Do you mean air-mail crates or some of those

pilots who're searching for signs of Buddy Warner?" the other demanded of Perk.

"Either kind, if it's all the same to you, Jack. If we're not so far away from where the poor chap said his last goodbye as he took off with his sack of Uncle Sam's mail, strikes me we had ought to've run across one bus anyway, of all the flock that must be on the wing lookin' for the boy."

"Just so Perk, but consider the immensity of space out in these regions, with all these mountains to get lost in. A score of pilots might spend every single day for a whole year in winging around the neighborhood of the Colorado Canyon and never once glimpse the smashed crate, even if it was in some open stretch of ground."

"Which I take it covers the case okay," agreed Perk. "On 'count o' them big holes in the ground together with the tricky cross currents o' wind, air pockets an' all such sneaky things every airman hates with all his heart, we have to keep up some high an' even through the glass, small objects like the wings o' a smashed crate are bound to look like pin points."

"When your eyes tire of searching," remarked the considerate pilot, "give me the word and I'll change places with you, partner."

"Sure thing old hoss—I don't aim to hog *all* the fun," Perk quickly observed and kept star-

ing this way and that in an honest endeavor to cover the entire ground as thoroughly as possible.

From time to time he would break loose to tell of some abnormal freak of nature that he had discovered. To all these sallies Jack made no reply for he himself was thinking deeply and trying to map out a consistent method of conducting the search on which they were now fully launched.

The Government, conscious of the duty devolving on the post office department to show natural concern for the lives of its faithful employees, had seen fit to detach Jack and Perk from all other duties and order them to exert themselves to the utmost in an effort to find the missing pilot. Aside from the glory that would fall to those who won out, Jack felt very keenly for the old mother of Buddy Warner, doubtless passing sleepless nights while the mystery of her boy remained an unsolved problem.

CHAPTER XII

IN THE COLORADO CANYON COUNTRY

Ever since hopping off at Cheyenne their course had been more or less directly southwest, for Jack, on consulting his chart, had figured that this would take them close to their intended goal.

Only in a general way was he able to decide as to where they must be on this morning after their long flight through that enormous fog belt. Strange as it might seem, thus far they had glimpsed nothing positive that would give them their exact location, but just the same Jack was so certain about his figuring, knowing what distance they had covered since the start, that he did not concern himself greatly over this question.

In good time something would come along to clear things up nicely, and once they got their bearings it would be possible to pick up the game with heart and soul enlisted in its carrying out.

"Now would you b'lieve it partner," Perk was saying at one time much later in the morning, with the same wilderness covering the face

of the earth far below as wide as eye could reach," if there ain't one o' them pirates o' the air spreadin' himself to try an' cut across our path, like he wanted to take a close-up o' sech a queer contraption that keeps on makin' all them roarin' noises. I call him a feathered hijacker, 'cause he lies in wait tryin' to hold up industrious fish-hawks when they been an' grabbed a dinner outen the river, an' robbin' 'em o' it."

"Oh! I reckon now you're meaning an eagle, eh Perk?"

"Old Baldhead, the great American fraud that Uncle Sam keeps stampin' on his coins. A loafer an' a shark, too lazy to do his own huntin' an' stealin' his grub from the hard workin' osprey. See him cuttin' it for all he's worth, tryin' to butt in on us! Hey, mebbe the ornery fool's got a big notion we're tryin' to put the laugh on him, an' means to give us the defy—a fool notion, I'd call it. Let him try hittin' up against the side o' our fuselage an' see what happens to *him,* that's all."

Jack evinced sudden interest, as was proven by his saying sharply:

"But see here that may not be all, as you think! What if the fool bird plunges madly at our ship? Instead of butting his head against the fuselage he might strike our propeller, which would knock him galley-west, but also disable our

craft. Perk, better get out that sub-machine gun of yours and be ready to settle his hash if it seems likely he can head us off."

"Hot ziggetty dog! I never though o' *that,* partner!" cried the now thoroughly alarmed Perk hastening to scramble out of his seat, dive back and drag out the firearm with which he had done such gallant service not so long ago.

"Watch the rascal," Jack was telling him in steadying tones, "and if it looks as though he'll reach us, start gunning for him, otherwise hold your fire out of respect for the motto on our gold coins. Sit pretty, partner—I'm depending on you to do a good job."

Jack changed his course a trifle, as if intending to give the charging bird a chance to live to another day. In this way the chase was made more stern and the possibility of a fatal contact between bird and the man-made king of the upper air rendered less likely.

Perk, crouching there with ready gun, held himself prepared to pour out a hot fusilade if it became absolutely necessary. He had to judge the velocity of the eagle's advance and also note how Jack was so skillfully edging away to the left in order to avoid slaughtering the brave but misguided bird.

After all it was a false alarm, for the eagle shot past at least twenty feet back of their rud-

der, going "for all he was worth" as Perk afterwards explained it and by the time he could swerve, the plane was so far away that the baffled bird felt compelled to give up the pursuit, though doing so grudgingly, Perk decided.

He hardly knew whether to be inclined to jeer at the foolish actions of the king of the air, or give him a cheer on account of so brashly charging the great bulk that he must have considered a rival in his special field. At least there was no need of making use of the gun which he hastened to put back in its former nook where it could easily be snatched up in case of any sudden emergency.

"Mebbe it's jest as well I didn't have to riddle the old jay," Perk told himself as he resumed his seat and his glasses. "May be a buccaneer, like some folks say, but he's got good grit and won't take a dare from even a Zeppelin, should one come sailin' along in his happy huntin' grounds."

The morning was wearing away with the amphibian keeping up its merry pace and the country showing no signs of betterment. Civilization was a million miles distant, one would imagine, when looking down on those amazing masses of rocky peaks over which they were winging their way. Judging from what they saw hour after hour, Jack could well believe

that changes there had been only to a small degree since Columbus first sighted these shores hundreds of years back. Indeed, for thousands upon thousands of years those giant fingers of rock had been pointing to the blue sky above, just as they saw them now.

They ate some food about noon, washing it down with a few gulps of water they carried in a jug. Strange that even Perk had not remarked upon being hungry, which was such a remarkable thing for him that Jack concluded his mind for once had been taken off the subject of eating and was fully occupied with the strange mission upon which they were engaged.

Several times Jack asked the observer whether he could make out any signs of a river bed ahead and seemed surprised and a bit disappointed when Perk replied in the negative.

"Unless I'm away off my base," Jack finally told his companion, "we ought to be somewhere in the vicinity of the Colorado and the enormous canyon through which it makes its way down to the Gulf of California."

Perk displayed a sudden fresh interest in matters.

"I swan, partner," he remarked in considerable agitation, "does that 'ere mean we might set eyes on that monster hole in the ground I've read so much about? Are we close to the Colorado

River where she runs 'long through the Rainbow gorge and the towerin' cliffs rear their red, blue, green and yeller walls hundreds o' feet high on both sides?"

"You said it Perk. Chances are we'll set eyes on that big hole in the ground they call the Colorado Canyon before we strike another night."

"Je-ru-salem crickets buddy! That sounds good to me!" exulted Perk, visibly stirred by the thrilling information. Allers did sorter hanker 'bout lampin' that pictur', an' it'll please me plenty if dreams do come true."

This kept him quiet for some time, though he worked his glasses with a fresher zeal as though bent on missing nothing that seemed worth looking at. But thus far not the slightest object had been sighted that might turn out to be of special interest to any one looking for a smashed plane.

The sun was now well down the western heavens and Perk was beginning to fear the prophecy of his companion would fail to come true, when something caught his vigilant eye far in the distance and on which he focussed his binoculars. He looked long and steadily before announcing his discovery to Jack.

"I kinder guess partner, we're there all right," he finally burst out.

"And what makes you feel that way, Perk?"

"From the signs ahead I figger we're gettin'

close to a big sink and I c'n see the sun glintin' from somethin' shiny yonder — might be that hotel they got on the top o' the west wall, if I remember straight. Yes-siree, it's jest like I'm tellin' you matey, the old river must lie down in that deep canyon. Gee whiz! it makes me near goofy jest to think how I'm goin' to see the biggest canyon in the whole world, with painted walls an' all sorts o' queer relics o' ancient Injuns scattered around. Hot ziggetty dog! ain't I glad they sent us out this way though! If on'y we c'n find that boy, I'll be the happiest chap on earth, an' that's no lie either."

That was Perk's usual way of arriving at a decision without making certain. Jack on the other hand, was accustomed to holding himself in check until he had actually proven it a certainty and even then he rarely gave way to any outburst of joy, leaving that to his more excitable comrade.

In due time they found themselves looking down on one of the most wonderful sights that can be found anywhere in the wide world. A spectacle unmatched in any other land which people come thousands of miles to feast their enraptured eyes upon.

CHAPTER XIII

A STRANDED PLANE

Jack continued to stay at the controls, possibly because he wished Perk to do the observing as his keen eyesight was such a valuable asset.

It proved that the object Perk had seen, and on which the sun was shining in such a dazzling way, was the hotel that catered to the many visitors and tourists who at certain seasons of the year flocked thither, enjoying the thrill of gazing on those natural wonders so profuse in that locality.

Perk could readily make out a number of moving figures on the edge of the canyon, evidently intent on watching the coming of the airship and doubtless speculating as to its mission.

Undoubtedly other boats had been seen flying overhead, since that particular section of country was being combed by a host of swift craft gathered from various quarters, all engaged in the humane task of striving to find the missing air mail pilot.

But Jack gave no evidence of a desire to drop down in the vicinity of the great hotel with its

throng of guests—they could give him no information and the time could be more profitably used in commencing a systematic search. It would be time to descend when their stock of supplies in the line of food fell short or the gas tank gave promise of becoming empty. Nothing less must distract them from the task they had been commissioned to carry out with all their ability.

"I c'n see people comin' up out o' the canyon now," Perk asserted with emphasis, "an' seems like they must be mounted on mules or donkeys, 'cause no hosses c'n climb up an' down sech steep slopes. Say, ain't that worth comin' out here to see? I'll tell the world it sure is! Mebbe, 'fore we starts back to old Cheyenne, we'll get a chanct to go down into the bowels o' the earth like them folks have been doin', an' seein' the hull panorama from the bottom.

"Who knows, Perk?" quoth the unmoved Jack, "but in the meantime we've got to stick on our job and do our level best to find Buddy—because of his mourning mother if for no other reason—and that goes!

"I like to hear you say that, partner," cried sympathetic Perk, "an' me to back it up to the limit. My eyes! what a peach o' a pictur' that sure is! Somethin' never to be rubbed out while you live. Beats anything I ever set eyes on by

big odds. Niagara was fine enough, but say, it ain't in the same class as this paintin' o' Old Dame Nature's."

"I'd call it sublime, and let it go at that," Jack admitted, "for words never were coined that could do justice to such a tremendous thing in the way of natural scenery."

The hotel was now in their rear and rapidly growing fainter in the distance, while below lay the wide reaches of the enormous canyon, dug through uncounted ages by the swift current of the famous river that miles further on would disappear from sight between walls that reared their heads hundreds of feet aloft.

As if to give them both a comprehensive view of the entire opening, Jack had reduced their speed to a minimum and was following the canyon gap with Perk keeping his eyes glued to his glasses, unable to tear them away for a single second lest he lose something of absorbing interest, possibly the most entrancing object in all that long category.

So it was that Jack felt a shock when he sudrenly heard Perk giving tongue as though gripped with some fresh cause for excitement.

"Hey! what's this I'm seein' partner?" he yelled.

"Whereabouts?" demanded the other in a flash, for there was something he could detect

in Perk's squeal that would indicate a discovery of more than usual importance.

"Right down in the ditch—look ahead, an' you'll see it! Boy, if that ain't a airship lyin' on the sandy shore o' the river, I'll eat my hat! An' yes, by gum! there's a man standin' alongside wavin' somethin' white like a flag o' distress! Oh my stars, c'n it be possible we've run on to poor Buddy Warner so clost to help an' him stuck there like a pig in a poke all this while? Jack, whatever c'n it mean, do you reckon?"

Jack was rather startled by what his comrade was saying, but as always proved himself quick to act.

"Take over the stick Perk, and give me the glasses. I must see for myself what it means. A plane down in that big hole, close to the edge of the rushing river and only a mile or so from help—it seems incredible—why, as I understand from what I've heard and read, parties with their guides often spend a night in the canyon looking through those queer Indian stone houses and even wander along the river for some distance. Why, he never could be that close by all this time and his condition continue unknown."

He was riveting his gaze upon the spot Perk had pointed to, and just as the other had declared, some one was making frantic gestures, waving a piece of white cloth and plainly asking

them to drop down and rescue him or at least convey a knowledge of his desperate situation to those at the hotel.

The more Jack stared the greater did the mystery become in his mind. It simply could not be—there must be some other explanation to account for so unreasonable a condition. What should they do about it? The man kept waving his distress signal, and possibly was at the same time shouting something, to judge from his actions although of course his voice failed utterly to reach their ears.

"What's goin' to be done about it, eh partner?" Perk was saying as he swung in a great curve and again started to pass over the object of Jack's scrutiny and bewilderment. "Do we leave him there, after comin' so far to help the poor lad? Ain't there a way for us to slant down an' drop on that sandy shore his boat's restin' on? Bet every red cent I got it c'n be done, brother an' you're the boy to tackle the ticklish job."

"Make still another circuit, Perk," said Jack earnestly from which his companion judged he must be even then considering in his mind whether the proposed scheme were feasible or not.

"He keeps right along signalin' to us not to desert him, Jack. Mebbe now our's ain't the first ship to come sailin' along an' the others gave up any idea o' landin' in the ditch, so he's getting

a bit desperate—an' hungry as all get out in the bargain. Must a'been three days since he was reported missin' you remember, partner."

Jack apparently was not wholly convinced. It might not be so difficult a task to drop down successfully, but being able to come up again would be a horse of another color, he figured. Then all at once he made his decision.

"We'll go, Perk—the stick if you please and stand by to lend a hand if it's needed when we make contact. I can see what looks like an inviting place in the water where we can use those dandy pontoons to advantage. Ready for it?"

They swung around once more and this time Jack turned the nose of his craft directly at a slant so as to head for the spot where the pilot of the wrecked ship was running up and down in great excitement, still flinging his signal of distress back and forth.

But when he saw that they were actually starting to drop below the majestic walls of the wonderful canyon as though bent on endeavoring to assist him, he stopped short and stood there wringing his hands in what to Jack was a rather peculiar way for a brave man to do. Still, if he had been through a series of hard knocks, had perhaps even been seriously wounded in the crash of his boat, he might be close to distraction. Anyway their's must be the job of ascer-

taining the truth and afterwards doing all they could to afford him relief, though his plane might be beyond remedy and would have to be abandoned.

Now they were approaching the bottom of that rocky canyon—the walls towered above like grim cliffs or battlements, forged by nature to protect the stream that swept through the enormous gorge. It seemed to Perk, as he shot one thrilling look upward, as though they were a mile high and that everything around them was mightily magnified—all save the river itself, together with the stranded ship and the figure standing there watching their coming so eagerly, so filled with freshly risen hope.

Then contact was made between their wonderful pontoons and the surface of the Colorado River and there they floated on the turbulent bosom of the stream.

CHAPTER XIV

JACK MAKES A DISCOVERY

While thus dropping down into the great wide canyon by easy stages, Jack had taken note of several things, although not for a single second failing to keep tabs on his dials and the action of the ship when meeting certain baffling currents of air welling up from the depths and which might have played havoc with things only for this watchful, never-ceasing care on his part.

First he became aware of the fact that the abyss was no longer subject to clear visibility—in fact, it would have been next to impossible for him to have made a decent contact with the river surface only that a sudden glow had started up as if by magic.

It was a fire that helped to dissipate the gathering gloom in that particular spot and the one responsible for this welcome illumination must be the unknown aviator whose crate had been wrecked when falling into the vast sink with the gorgeously painted walls.

Evidently he must have gathered a few piles of dry driftwood so plentifully scattered along

the banks of the river, and prepared a pyre to which a lighted match could be applied, a cheery blaze following. Jack sensed all this even without distracting his attention from his work.

At least this seemed to be proof that the unfortunate pilot had kept his wits about him, no matter what dire happenings might have come his way.

The sun could not have set—of that Jack felt certain—so the sudden lack of daylight in the vicinity of that deeply imbedded river must have been caused by the passing of some heavy cloud over the face of the sun. Jack even remembered noticing a bank of clouds hanging close to the southwestern horizon for the last half hour and a favoring breeze coming up must have pushed them across, so as to form a lofty but effectual screen.

No matter—nothing counted as long as the ship rested happily on the water with Perk hastening to drop overboard a small but efficient anchor, such as would be apt to take up scant room aboard an amphibian, but prove invaluable on occasions like the present.

This was only a part of Perk's duties, however—when thus anchored the ship swung to and fro on its reliable pontoons but they were fully twenty feet distant from the sandy stretch beyond the river's edge.

The current was anything but friendly and there was a strong possibility that the depth between the beach and the anchored boat would prove to be several feet, with perhaps pockets twice that, to judge from the way the water swirled in eddies.

But all that had been considered when equipping the amphibian for service on land or water. Of what avail would it be to have the pontoons so handy if, after coming down on some body of water, they must wade or swim in order to make a landing?

Perk was engaged in taking vast breaths into his capacious lungs and then blowing into some sort of queer rubber contraption which, expanding rapidly, presently assumed the proportions of a squatty little boat—nothing to boast of so far as appearances went, but capable, when fully blown up, of ferrying himself and his companion over the few yards of open water lying between themselves and their coveted landing place.

Without just such an auxiliary, the usefulness of a land and water aircraft must be considerably cut down, as pilots have long since ascertained from actual experience. Just as had been the case of the folding anchor that, with the rubber boat took very little room until needed, it paid big dividends in comparison with the small amount of trouble it gave.

The castaway air pilot was standing near by watching everything they did with the utmost eagerness. Thus far he had not seen fit to call out, but his manner proved the intense interest he felt.

Jack waved his hand encouragingly to the other, even while Perk was launching the clumsy rubber boat which proved to be so buoyant that it kept bobbing up and down with each movement of the speeding, gurgling current.

The fire was now burning brightly so that the whole immediate vicinity seemed lighted up. Jack involuntarily cast an inquisitive eye in the direction where the stranded ship lay with one wing dipping in the river. So familiar had long acquaintance with the various models of flying boats made Jack, that as a rule it required only a single glance to tell him the make of any ship he was seeing for the first time.

"A single-seat open-cockpit Stinson-Detroiter, if I know my onions," he was telling himself, "and I'll be hanged if I ever did know of the mail being carried in these days aboard one of those older types of craft. Looks like it had been used more or less in the bargain. I understood, somehow or other, that Buddy Warner was using a cabin ship—but he might have changed over to this for some reason."

Still this fact was perhaps the entering wedge

that started a dim suspicion in Jack's mind so that after entering the small boat and having Perk wield the dumpy paddle, he eyed the waiting figure of the wrecked pilot as if making some sort of decision.

Just then Perk gave one of his queer grunts and in a husky whisper that barely reached the ears of his chum went on to say:

"Jack, would you b'lieve me, that there ain't our Buddy a'tall—never did set eyes on this here youngster, for a fact. Hot ziggetty dog! now ain't that the rottenest luck ever?"

Jack made no reply, but Perk's discovery only justified the suspicion that had been forming in his own mind. Then they had had their drop into the canyon all for naught—at least so far as the discovery of the missing air-mail pilot was concerned.

True, the other was in something of a predicament, but he did not seem to be seriously injured and when another day dawned his need of assistance would surely be discovered by those connected with the big hotel, so that after all his troubles were only for a brief while.

Still, they had made the swoop and being on hand it would hardly seem decent and courteous for them to hold back, when possibly they could be of more or less help.

This being the case, Jack held his own counsel

and made no answer to Perk's show of disappointment that almost bordered on resentment. He stepped out of the boat on to the sand when the bobbing craft grounded and waited for Perk to toss the rope to him so their clumsy craft might not yield to the wooing of that treacherous current and pass down-stream, leaving the pair of them marooned.

Now that he found himself close to the stranger, Jack could see that he appeared to be a mere wisp of a lad. His helmet was on his head, with the goggles pushed up, he wore what seemed to be almost new dungarees for they had a fresh appearance in startling contrast with those he and Perk wore over their other clothes to take up all the grease and oil that of necessity must be met with aboard any ship that required a motor for propelling purposes.

Jack's first inclination was to decide the other must be one of those dudish young chaps who sometimes drift into the ranks of flying men. Not at all weak or yellow when occasion arose to prove their stamina, but so constituted by nature that they can "carry on" and yet show little signs of the ordinary pilot's addiction to dirt.

He stepped toward the other, leaving to Perk the job of finding some means for securing the end of the rope, possibly to a stake driven into

the sand or perhaps to the nearby wreck of the Stinson-Detroiter ship.

"Seems that you've had a little mishap, stranger," Jack remarked with one of his pleasant smiles that always won him friends wherever he went. "If we can be of any assistance just call on us. It's a part of our creed, you know, for air pilots to stand by one another in difficulty. Perhaps your boat may not be so badly smashed but what we can knock it into shape and get it up out of this queer old hole."

He saw the boy drop the look of anxiety that had marked his face and even allow his features to relax in a smile.

"I don't know how I can thank ou for saying that—I am so eager to get out of this scrape, the worst that ever happened to me, but then I am something of a greenhorn pilot as yet, though even that fact couldn't keep me from trying my wings. I *must* get out of this and be on my way again."

And even as he listened to those pleading words, Jack realized that the pilot of the crashed Stinson-Detroiter plane was a girl!

CHAPTER XV

THE HAND OF FATE

It was a surprising discovery that Jack had just made, but after all not so very wonderful. In these modern days a multitude of daring girls and young women were becoming air minded and filled with the ambition to become pilots. The fascination of such a life appealed to them with irresistible force so that already some of them had made a most creditable showing in the annals of aviation.

For one thing the fact that the one he had offered to help had turned out to be a girl gave Jack a twinge—he realized that more than ever he and Perk would be obliged to "stick around," and endeavor to overcome her difficulties, if the disabilities of the wrecked plane could in any way be remedied.

That was apt to mean a further delay in their work, a serious handicap, since already too much time had passed if there remained any further hope of finding poor Buddy Warner.

"Tell me, did you come through this crash

without being seriously hurt yourself?" he asked her.

Perk must have made the same sudden discovery as Jack for he was standing near by, staring hard at the novice pilot and with his mouth open. Possibly Perk also deplored the fact that their meeting with a woman flyer was bound to interfere more or less with those plans of his pal's which above all things concerned the need of speedy action, unhampered liberty of going where they willed and staying on the job steadily, come storm, fog, riotous wind or fair weather.

"A few little bruises seems to be the extent of my injuries—next to nothing, I assure you, but if they were ten times as serious it would not keep me from going up again, if my ship were workable—indeed, it is absolutely necessary for me to do so!"

Jack looked at her again. Most assuredly she did have the necessary stamina required of a successful air pilot. He did not believe any ordinary peril could deter such a girl from attempting what she had planned.

"I am glad to know that you were not badly hurt, he told her, but it's plain to be seen you must have handled your stick cleverly or your ship would have crashed ten times as hard as it did. The first thing to be done is for us to check

the craft over and learn the extent of the damage. If, luckily, it happens to be but a broken wing, possibly we can fix it up well enough to get the boat out of this fearful hole. However did it happen you picked out this place to come down in, or was it just by a rare chance? You could not have found as good a landing-field inside of a hundred miles I reckon, miss."

She smiled at hearing him address her by that title, since it was the first real evidence that he understood the situation.

"I suppose it was partly luck," she told him simply, "although I did have an idea it would be a hundred per cent better to fall on what looked like a sandy shore down here, than take chances with those terrible rocks up above. Just what I did and how I landed so easily, I'm not at all certain about, but Heaven was kind and yet I hope never to find myself in the same bad fix again. Did you say you would take a look at my ship and find out what's wrong? It's kind of you to go to all that trouble, but I must get out of this as soon as possible — oh! I surely must!"

Jack could not help being struck with the way she said this, with her pretty sun and wind-tanned face taking on a determined, resolute expression. He would not have been human to thus hear and

see without beginning to wonder what is could be that influenced her to speak so. Why should she show such a yearning for a chance to continue her flight? What genuine reason could a girl have for such an overwhelming desire for action? Was there any sort of endurance race on the books for women pilots who had recently obtained their necessary flying licenses—or was it some sort of a private wager that caused her to betray so much solicitude?

Would he and Perk be justified in holding over so as to get her started, granting that her ship could be put in condition again by means of their combined knowledge and ability along those lines?

Somehow, when he looked keenly into her face, he failed to discover the faintest trace of guile thereon. Once convinced of this fact, Jack threw every suspicion to the four winds and came to the conclusion that both duty and the natural chivalry in his nature compelled him to do all that was possible to aid a fellow pilot in distress.

"Perk, suppose you tote that painter up to the ship here and fasten it. We've got a little job on our hands for I've promised this young lady to check up and learn how badly her boat has been wrecked. By the way miss, you haven't so far told us your name—mine happens to be

Jack Ralston and this is my partner, Perk—Gabe Perkiser in full."

"And mine is Susanne Cramer—one of the newcomers in the ranks of women air pilots. It hasn't been so long since they gave me my license, after I'd done my full allowance of solo flying. This is my own ship—I bought it secondhand, but in perfect condition. Until today I have never had any trouble but the engine started to miss and I knew I must land or crash dreadfully. Please see if there's any hope for my getting out of this place soon, for it means everything in the world to me."

Jack saw that suspicious old bachelor, Perk give him a solemn look and wink his left eye, just as though he distrusted the wisdom of their wasting precious minutes trying to help a flighty little girl pilot, evidently on some sort of a silly lark and making out that it was a most important matter indeed—as most girls always do, according to his limited knowledge.

Thereupon Jack shook his head at scoffing Perk, knowing as he did how the other was inclined to be a woman-hater.

"Come on Perk, now that you've made our ferry secure let's get busy and see what's what here. You take the off wing and I'll look over the near one, then we can double-up on the en-

gine and reach a conclusion. It won't take us long, Perk and it's a duty every decent pilot owes to his class, remember."

"Okay Boss, jest as you say, I'm willin'; but all the same it looks to me like it'd turn out to be a bum job. That old bus has been given some hard knocks an' won't tune up worth a red cent."

The girl thereupon uttered a little pitiable moan that influenced Jack to turn a bit sternly upon his pal and say quickly:

"No snap judgment Perk! You never can tell how badly things are until you give them the first over. Come on now, partner I know you well enough to be sure you'll give an honest verdict, no matter what comes."

"Sure thing, Jack—my dad taught me to 'hew straight to the line, let the chips fall where they will'—that's been the Perkiser motto right along, an' see where it carried us as a family. Got one uncle sheriff o' a county in Kansas an' another at the head o' a hot dog emporium, which is goin' some, I want you to know."

The girl looked as though amused at Perk's quaint way of saying things but that anxious, eager expression quickly came upon her face again.

For some little time the pair rummaged around and seemed to act as though they both knew their

business, as well as the makeup of any plane ever conceived by the human mind. Perk knocked on this and that, made all manner of little tests where he believed were necessary, and in other ways carried himself as befitted by education and calling to be a judge of an airship's anatomy.

She followed them about, always intently watching and squeezing her hands in a way to show how wrought up she must be with the suspense. Then, when they were through with the inspection and checking up, Jack and Perk "went into a huddle," as the latter would have termed it, nodding their heads and talking in low tones. Finally Jack was shoved forward by the other as the one who ought to bring the sad tidings to the distressed girl pilot.

"Oh! you have something dreadful to tell me," she cried out, wringing her hands. "Is it too badly wrecked for you to fix up so I can pull out of this awful hole and take off again?"

"I'm sorry to say, Miss Cramer," Jack told her, "your boat is so badly knocked out that it can never be taken out of this place by its own power. It will, I fear, have to be dismantled and carried up piece-meal, to be shipped to the company's works for rebuilding."

She put up her quivering hands to her face and started crying.

"Oh! it is terrible—just *terrible,* when he needs me so! Three days have passed already, and I felt that if any one could find him surely love would show me the way. What will poor Mother Warner say when she fails to hear from me as I promised? Poor Mother, and poor Buddy. What will happen to us all?"

CHAPTER XVI

SUZANNE INSISTS

What seemed to be the whole truth flashed into Jack's mind when he heard the grieving girl pilot express the sentiments that influenced her into making this far-flung flight so soon after winning her new pilot's license.

It staggered him, too—not so much that Suzanne should thus turn out to be Buddy Warner's sweetheart, though in itself that was decidedly interesting; but to think how a strange and perverse Fate had so decreed that she should meet up with the pair who had been deputized by the Department at Washington to start forth, and do everything in their power to solve the mystery of Buddy's strange disappearance, also, *if possible,* accomplish his finding.

As for Perk, who apparently had seen a great light all of a sudden, just as Jack had done, almost "threw a fit." He declared later on, when he could ponder, how many thousand chances there were against anything like this lucky meeting coming to pass.

Jack, chancing to let his gaze wander that

way, could see Perk staring with round eyes at the inspired face of the brave girl. He also feebly scratched his head with slow movements, just as if his wits had gone astray under the shock.

"Can it be possible, Suzanne," stammered Jack, grinning amiably the while, "that you happen to be——er, Buddy's *sweetheart*—what you might call his 'best girl'?"

She regarded him with an encouraging smile, and nodded her head, forgetting to cry, as though something in his way of saying this bade her hug fresh hope to her heart.

"Why, yes, most certainly I am—we expected to be married in another three months—Buddy's got the dear little cottage on the way, and everything was planned—and then came that dreadful news telling how he was lost somewhere among these awful mountains. My ship was being repaired, for I had had a slight accident in making too fast a landing on rough ground, and it took nearly two days for those slow poke mechanics to get it checked up again—two frightful days that I never want to live again. Then I hopped off, and came here, for the boys at the flying field told me just where he must have gone down, you know. Perhaps it was a crazy thing to do—they tried to persuade me to give it up, but I had promised Mother Warner to find him—and what was the use of my being

a full-fledged air pilot if I had to stay a *kiwi*—stick to the ground, when my Buddy needed me so?"

"Still, it was an unwise thing for you to have done, though nobody could blame you, because Buddy was well worth taking chances for. But, you must have realized there would be scores of skillful pilots on the job, every one bent on finding your boy, if it lay in human power. My pal and I are in the employ of Uncle Sam—taken off all other business, and set to making a wide search—we have come all the way from Cheyenne, through the worst fog bank that ever was known, just for that purpose, which makes it seem doubly strange how we should have been brought in contact with you, Miss Cramer."

She smiled through her tears, and then went on hastily to say:

"I can only think it was Providence answering the prayers I have been sending up ever since the dreadful word came to us there in our little town, that Buddy has put on the map. Oh! I am sure the way was opened up to me—that now you know who and what I am, you could not have the heart to leave me here while you took up the search I had dedicated myself to carry out!"

Jack evidently could give a pretty shrewd guess as to what lay back of her words—she un-

doubtedly meant to implore them to let her accompany them in their hunt.

So he scratched his chin in a way he had when placed in a dilemma—Perk, saw him do that and understood how matters stood; for he grinned shamelessly, as though it actually tickled him to see his best pal placed in such a hole, with no way out save in yielding.

"Er—much as I—we, that is—would like to oblige you, Miss Cramer—I'm afraid it would be impossible. We belong to a Department of the Government that frowns on our mixing up what they call business with pleasure. They set us on this job, and that means we've got to take off without any more delay than we can possibly help—I'm sure you'll understand what I mean."

Perk grinned some more, just as if he had an idea his usually dependable pal hardly knew himself what he was aiming at. The girl novice pilot looked grieved, and then brightened up.

"But — what's to become of *me* then — you surely wouldn't be so mean as to leave me here in this dreadful hole all night—I'd go out of my mind with thinking every little sound meant that some ferocious wild beast was creeping up on my fire, ready to make a meal of me; which of course would be rough, after all those fierce lessons in the air, and actually getting my pilot's license after all. And besides, I did really and

truly promise Ma Warner I'd find Buddy, and fetch him back home with me."

Jack looked at her entreating face, gave a glance at the grinning Perk, drew a long breath, shrugged his shoulders with the air of saying in desperation: "That's that then; and what are you going to do about it, when a young woman sets you on a red-hot gridiron like that."

There seemed nothing to do but capitulate, and make the best of a bad bargain. After all it was not as if they could find no room for Suzanne—she was such a little thing, and besides their new cloud-chaser was capable of carrying a weight almost twice the amount of the present cargo, gas and all.

"All right, then, Miss Cramer, we'll take you with us when we start out of here," he told her, allowing himself to shut off his feeling of near dismay, and actually smiled again in his accustomed way.

"Oh! thank you so much—Jack," she told him, with sincerity in both voice and manner. "I promise not to give you the least trouble, and perhaps I could make myself useful sooner or later, especially if we *do* find my Buddy, and he—should be badly injured, so as to need a nurse's care—for you see I was on my way to be a trained nurse when I got air-minded, and set

out to be a flyer, so sometimes I might go with Buddy."

"But this will mean we must all of us remain here in the great canyon for the night," he reminded her.

"But that would be wasting many hours, and he needing me so much," she complained, with a pitiful look that made Jack regret his inability to start right off and be doing.

"Listen, please," he said, gently but firmly, "you can see by looking up that the sun has set, and night is creeping out—already down in this deep hole it's next to impossible for any one to see what might lie in the way; so that makes it too risky to try and pull out. I'd like as not wreck my ship by running up against a snag in the water, or a stray boulder on the shore. Whether we took you with us or not I'd made up my mind to stick it out here for the night."

"Yes," here broke in Perk, who evidently thought he was due to "butt in" and have his little say, "and besides, even if we did manage to make the riffle without bustin', what could we do knockin' around in the dark—just a sheer waste o' good gas, an' gettin' nowhere a'tall."

Since it was now two against one, and they both seemed so kind, Suzanne wisely gave in.

"You've convinced me, Jack, and I'll say no more," she told him sweetly; "but do you know

I haven't had a bite to eat for ever so long; though Ma did make me take aboard enough rations to feed a regiment, including tea and coffee, as well as an assortment of pots and pans."

Perk immediately betrayed fresh interest in life, for it was wonderful how the fellow brightened up, as though just then realizing that he himself must be perilously close to starvation.

"We'll help you get them out o' the bus, lady," he hastened to say; "if so be you'll kindly show us where they be—ain't that so, partner?"

Jack did not seem at all averse to such a proceeding—why not make things as pleasant as possible since a capricious Fate had thrown their fortunes together in this mad way?

"Suppose you attend to all that, Perk," he told the other, knowing how efficient his partner was along such lines; "while you're doing it under Miss Cramer's directions I'll take another look at her crate, and see just how we can drag it further back from the river, so it will be safe when we're gone."

CHAPTER XVII

THE CAMP IN THE CANYON

Things immediately began to happen, and for the time being amidst the excitement of showing Perk just where the stores and things were located aboard the stranded Stinson-Detroiter, Miss Cramer seemed to temporarily forget the load of trouble she was carrying on her little shoulders.

Indeed, as Jack had already sized her up, she was rather a remarkable sort of a girl—so sensible, so level-headed, and truly brave in the bargain. Under such a heavy strain he felt certain ninety-nine girls out of a hundred would have given way to their helplessness, and collapsed; but here this one had taken her courage in both hands, to set out in the expectation of accomplishing a task that thus far had baffled a score or more of the greatest aviation aces the country had ever known.

Soon the energetic Perk had landed everything in the line of eatables and such truck as Ma Warner—bless her dear old heart, Perk was saying to himself as he noted what a volume of good

stuff lay in the mound he had erected—had denuded her pantry in order that her beloved boy should have enough to keep starvation at bay, when Suzanne had eventually found him.

It was almost ludicrous to Jack to learn with what abiding faith those two who loved Buddy so well had lost no time in starting the lone expedition on its way; just as though they fully expected Suzanne, now a full-fledged pilot, and feeling able to conquer the world, could be attracted to the very spot where Buddy lay helpless, by the spark of true love—to them it must be like the magnetic needle, always pointing so faithfully straight at the North Pole, and the star that hung over it.

"Bless her heart"—Jack was telling himself later on, as he listened to her talking so cheerfully, while busying herself in cooking the supper, with Perk attending to the fire, and offering to help in "any old way." She wouldn't have had a tinker's chance to do anything in this wild rocky country—only have her own crate crash, and double the tragedy. So it's lucky for them both we made this same queer contact tonight."

Jack was certainly vastly amused to watch how his cranky chum seemed to be acting. Usually Perk would have little or nothing to do with the other sex—Jack strongly suspected that at some time in his misty past Perk might have

been "turned down" by some girl in whom he was becoming interested, and so allowed his whole life to be soured by the experience.

But then this was different, and perhaps the affection he had once felt for Buddy Warner made him feel warmly toward a girl who adored the same chubby young flyer and who had forgotten her weakness as a newly fledged pilot, and struck out so boldly in hopes of finding the one who was lost.

The supper was voted a great success, especially by Perk, who drank innumerable cups of hot coffee, which he pronounced "nectar for the gods," growing a bit poetical in his exalted state of happiness. Suzanne, too, proved herself to be a wonderful cook, and Perk found himself quite envying Buddy—that is, if he was ever really found, and alive in the bargain—in having such a good helpmate and life partner to prepare wonderful meals for him every day in the year.

Afterwards he and Jack set about the job of dragging the single-seater Stinson-Detroiter something like forty feet back from the edge of the river, where it could stay until later on, when Suzanne might find a chance to visit the scene again, or send mechanics to dismantle her ship, and pack the parts back to the factory for reassembling.

She even wrote something on a sheet of paper,

which latter was attached to the wreck, and would doubtless serve to keep any curious tourists from damaging her property. So, too, she made up a small package of certain articles which she wished particularly to save, or would be apt to need for her personal comfort which, she assumed, might be taken with them on the coming voyage.

"In the morning," said Jack, after all these things had been attended to, "I'm meaning to ask you to let us transfer what gas you have aboard your bus to our own tank—it will be wasted here, while in our hands it may save us from spending many valuable hours running off to replenish our wasted supply. Of course I shall see that you are eventually reimbursed, Miss Cramer. Even as little as fifty gallons would mean we could stick to our job so much longer, and then too it might be the means of bringing us success."

"And if I had a million gallons every drop would be gladly devoted to the sacred task you have so loyally undertaken," she told him, with a suspicious glow in her eyes, which Jack imagined might be caused by bravely repressed tears. "I think it is just wonderfully fine the way you two—and all those other brave men—have been so willing to spend their time, hour

after hour, scouring the whole country in hopes of finding—my Buddy."

So Jack had to tell her how the entire world of flyers were like a company of blood brothers; an injury to one being resented by the entire calling—that their universal braving of the elements, and meeting similar perils in their daily work, made a bond like no other on earth, a kinship of like interests.

She was as yet only a novice, but already she had begun to have something of a similar exalted feeling toward other air pilots, so that it was not difficult for Suzanne to understand his meaning.

She told them not to worry about her—that she could easily make herself comfortable in the limited confine of her cockpit. True, it had no roof for shelter; but that bothered her not at all she told them, since she had camped many times in the open without even a canvas tent, or brush shanty; and besides, the stars were shining brightly overhead, showing they need fear nothing in the way of bad weather during the night.

Perk again assured himself that she was a mighty sensible and clear-headed little girl, and that if there were only more like her, perhaps—well, there couldn't be, and besides he'd never have the chance to run across any of that class—it just wouldn't be his good luck.

It was something to make Jack look back to

that same evening for years to come. He as well as Perk had spent many a night in camp, when on fishing trips, or it might be hunting hikes up in the big woods; but no other camp could have such a royal setting as this one did.

The lofty walls running up as if to touch the star-decked sky, and as they knew full well that with those vivid colors making a nature painting beyond all imagination, that the loud song of the happy river flowing through the greatest gorge in all the wide world, that the blazing campfire, throwing up soaring sparks seemed like bright messengers of hope to Suzanne as she sat there drinking it all in. It filled to the brim the longings connected with the missing air mail pilot. Then, too, there was present that air of eternal mystery such as would be apt to brood over the spot where ages back the Zuni, and other Indian tribes, had lived in those quaint stone houses still to be found all through the hundred miles of the Colorado Canyon.

Perk knew very well that as a rule there was no danger from wild animals—that frequently parties made it a point to spend at least one night camping in the canyon, just to say they had gone through such a weird experience; and he had never heard of them being disturbed by man or beast.

Just the same, with this glorious chance open-

ing up to him, Perk was persuaded to imagine himself constituted as the sole guardian of the fine girl aviatrix, into whose company they had so strangely fallen. Then, too he welcomed the opportunity to again handle that sub-machine-gun, which had been placed in his possession by the Government at the time he and Jack were running down the smuggling ring leaders on the Florida Coast, and a return of which had never thus far been demanded by the authorities.

Jack realized what was in the mind of his chum when he saw Perk looking over that powerful weapon with infinite joy; and while he did not imagine for a minute that there would arise any chance for requiring its services, still, since it afforded romantic Perk a good excuse for posing as a vigilant sentry, Jack held his peace, taking it out by giving his pal a few significant sly winks, to which the other deigned to take no notice whatsoever.

Neither of them knew what arrangements Suzanne had made for sleeping in the limited confines of her cockpit; but she bade them good-night, and climbed aboard with the greatest nonchalance imaginable, as though this thing of camping out under all manner of inconveniences might be an old story with her, as indeed Jack thought was more than probable.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE VIGILANT GUARD

It had been arranged between Jack and his mate that it would be just as well for them to fetch their blankets ashore and settle down on the sand for the remainder of the night.

In the first place, Jack thought it would not look very nice if they went aboard their anchored amphibian and left poor Suzanne there alone. Although she had not mentioned the matter at all, he felt sure it had given her a few qualms and that in her mind she really hoped they might decide to camp there by the fire.

Then again it would add to the girl's peace of mind, should she chance to be lying awake, unable to lose herself because of the haunting fears connected with the mystery of Buddy's fate, to raise her head and look around to always find that cheery fire blazing, dispersing the gloom in the immediate vicinity.

Last of all neither of them was so fond of doubling up and trying to forget their bodily discomforts aboard their crate, that they could afford to pass up a golden opportunity to sleep

on solid ground, though to be sure they were able to make the best of anything when duty bound.

So Perk went aboard by means of their ferry and returned with both dingy gray blankets as well as something to serve as pillows, since they had never made it a point to travel with such "soft stuff" as Perk always scornfully termed them.

"You turn in whenever you feel like it, Boss," Perk had said with a grin. "I'm not a bit sleepy, it happens an' 'sides I jest feel like havin' another whiff or two—somehow this 'baccy seems sweeter to me than I ever knowed it to be."

"It should," Jack told him, and evidently there must have been a significant emphasis attached to those two words to make Perk look so queer and finally grin in a most ridiculous way like a boy caught robbing the jam jar or the cookey pot, and at a loss to explain the situation.

Accordingly Jack rolled himself up in his covers, fixed his head rest to suit his own notion, turned his back on the blazing fire and lost all interest in everything saving getting his fair quota of slumber.

Perk sat there and smoked three pipes one after the other. Then feeling a little draught of cool air on his back he dragged his blanket to him, wrapped it around his form, and gun across his

knees, continued to sit with his back against a big boulder he had rolled down the sandy stretch for some purpose or other.

He continued to sit there like one of the sentries they say were found at their posts when the ruins of Herculaneum were cleared of the accumulated ashes of centuries, close to the grim old volcano. Proving how in those military days a soldier stuck to his post though the heavens might fall upon him.

Twice Perk got up, threw an armful of fuel on the dying fire, smoked a round of that "sweet" tobacco, cast a look of concern over toward where the stranded plane lay, shook his head doggedly and resumed his former position alongside the big boulder.

Apparently he had resolved to stay on duty throughout the entire night, and since Perk had a vein of doggedness in his disposition the chances were he would stick to his guns.

Perk may not have noticed it, but more than few times his chum's covering would move just a trifle, allowing him to peep out and on each occasion Jack would chuckle as if vastly entertained, after which it was sleep again for him.

Midnight came and went.

Stars shone down upon the lonesome camp, gradually wheeling westward until each in turn passed beyond the lofty rim of the canyon walls

while others climbed the eastern heavens to take their turn at peeping and eventually follow the track of those who were by that time doubtless setting beyond the genuine western horizon.

It must have been something like two in the morning when Perk waking up from a disturbed nap, in which he was beset by a pack of savage timber wolves with only a stout cudgel as a means of defense, caught a sound that sent a delightful quiver chasing up and down his spine.

"By gum! what was *that* now?" he asked himself, at the same time moving the gun from his knee to a more elevated position.

His tingling nerves announced the delight that filled his heart in contemplation of a possible chance to show how he could play guardian to a camp where innocence slept. Suddenly awakened from such a wild dream, Perk was in fine condition to see a pack of ferocious, gray, hungry, four-footed pirates of the waste places creeping up here, there, everywhere, with the intention of taking the camp by strategy and devouring every solitary inmate.

His fire happened to be low so that the light even close by could hardly be called worth while. Again Perk caught some sort of sound—to his excited mind it seemed similar to an animal's nails scratching the dry sand just at that point

where the high river tide was wont to reach its peak during the flood season.

Perk redoubled his efforts to see something moving while he nervously fingered his modern shooting iron, so radically different from those old guns used by the pioneer settlers of the virgin West in the early days of the far-flung frontier.

Now his quivering changed its character to certainty and rapture. Most surely he had caught a fleeting glimpse of some object that was slowly and cautiously creeping up toward the slumbering campfire.

A wolf—just one of the precious pack that had bothered him in his late dream—but then he had only himself to consider, whereas now it meant three separate human lives in peril. How his teeth gritted as he mentally called the slinking beast every opprobrious name he could think of, his finger meanwhile playing with the trigger that, once pulled, would start the long line of cartridges contained in the endless belt to discharging like a pack of firecrackers popping to commemorate the birthday of the good old U. S. A.

Yes, there could be no longer any doubt—he had not deceived himself after all, as he was beginning to suspect. Now the thing had ceased to move and was starting to rise up on all four legs, as though to be in readiness to answer the

call of the pack leader when it came time to charge.

"It's goodbye to you, sneaker and robber on four legs!" muttered Perk grimly as he put the butt of the gun up to his shoulder, covered the half seen figure, and pressed the trigger.

A burst of firing instantly followed as the mechanical gun commenced to bombard the particular spot where Perk had discovered the first of the oncoming pack. The reports came thick and fast, following on each others' heels and so it would continue to the end of the string unless Perk himself stopped the mechanism.

By the time he had thrown half a dozen leaden messengers at that one point, he felt he had effectually rid the world of one thief and marauder for which he should have the thanks of every decent person. Then Perk started to swing his arm from left to right, fully anticipating seeing a host of monster companions of his initial victim bounding forward and coming within range of the line of fire from his still spitting machine gun.

Nothing of the sort greeted his astonished eyes —in fact there was not the first sign of a single monster raider—only Jack indignantly bawling him out and demanding to know what in the devil he meant arousing the entire camp with

such a racket, and spoiling the rest of the night for sleep.

So Perk instantly shut off the deadly stream of fire that was expected to slay the whole pack of fiendish wolves as he swung his gun around with a circular movement.

"Whatever ailed you Perk, to set that thing going like mad?" Jack demanded, as he scrambled out of his enfolding blanket and advanced toward his chum, keeping a nervous eye on the gun meanwhile as if afraid Perk, whom he believed had been dreaming, would start it going again.

"Wolves—heaps an' heaps o' 'em—dreamed they had me cornered, with on'y a club to hold the pack off—then I woke up, and sure as you live, they was acomin' right in on us—saw one whoppin' big feller right over yonder an' let him have the whole works. Looky yourself Jack—honest to goodness he's lyin' right there where I knocked him cold."

Jack gave him a laugh and hastened over to see for himself just how much truth there could be in what the other had said with so much earnestness.

CHAPTER XIX

OVER-ZEALOUS PERK

"Perk!"

Strangely enough, while the late sharpshooter had seemed so positive concerning the identity and present status of his victim, he had not displayed the eagerness one might reasonably expect in such a sturdy guardian of the camp, to follow at Jack's heels.

"Yeah! what is it, old hoss?" he now asked, keeping one eye on the cockpit of the nearby Stinson-Detroiter, under the belief he saw a slight movement there, as though the girl pilot had been suddenly awakened from her sound slumber and was peeping out to ascertain the cause of the late terrific bombardment.

"Come over here and see your monster timber wolf," Jack was saying.

Perk shrugged his shoulders, as though some dim suspicion of the truth migh be already knocking at the door of his valiant heart, but since there was nothing else to be done he stiffened up and walked with soldierly tread to where Jack ominously awaited his coming.

"There he lies, fairly riddled," the other was saying, pointing as he thus greeted the arrival of the vigilant one. "He never had a chance to even give a single peep after you opened up on him—must have imagined yourself away back again on that Argonne front and sending another Hun ship down wrapped in flames, eh Perk?"

"Huh! he don't look *quite* as big as I guessed he was," admitted the now contrite marksman, beginning to weaken. "Mebbe I wasted too many slugs on the onery critter—sorter shot him to pieces you might say."

Jack laughed and Perk started, under the belief that evidences of feminine amusement drifted out of their cockpit close by as though Suzanne understood, and was not only interested but highly entertained in the bargain.

"That's a good one partner, for you sure *did* knock spots out of the poor little yellow sap—chances are he followed some party down here yesterday, got to hunting around on his own hook, and missed them when they started up Angel Trail. Then he discovered the light of your fire here and hoping he'd run upon real friends who'd toss him a scrap of meat, was crawling up to investigate when you blasted him with that fierce volley. Poor confiding little beast, a victim of mistaken identity."

"Migosh, a prairie dog!" muttered the astonished and mortified Perk, gazing ruefully down at the huddled mess before him, not too plainly seen on account of the fire flashing up only fitfully, being in need of more fuel.

"It's all right, Perk old man," soothed Jack, knowing just how mean his chum must be feeling, with that unseen girl a witness to his upset and her low gurgles of laughter coming distinctly to their ears in the bargain, "your intentions were okay, and you certainly did pot him neatly. No danger of any poacher stealing from a camp where *you've* taken up your post as sentry. That vivid dream you mentioned must have got on your nerves and when you discovered a moving figure, naturally enough your first thought was of sneaking four-footed mountain wolves about to make a raid."

"Hot ziggetty dog! I sure must 'a' had the jimjams all right," chuckled Perk, beginning to throw off that stupid feeling of being only half awake and even able to laugh at the joke on himself.

"Jack," said a merry, girlish voice just then, "tell your friend not to be worried about me. I've shot more than a few wolves and coyotes for I was born and brought up in the cow country you see. It's all right, Perk, don't feel badly

about it. I know it was just to stand up in my defense that made you so speedy on the trigger. Only gave me a little scare until I guessed what it all meant. I'm going to sleep some more, though it's a hard job to get Buddy's frightful predicament out of my mind."

"And Perk," said Jack, throwing an arm affectionately across the shoulders of his mate, "you turn this job over to me now and get a few winks before morning comes creeping along out of the east over there to start us on our way again. I'll sit right here, holding your old cannon and woe to the wolf, coyote or even another yellow cur that dares to sneak in on us."

So after all Perk was not feeling so very badly on account of his fiasco, though it did make him grimace to remember that those bright eyes of Buddy's best girl had been an amused witness to his humiliation.

He did not say another word, but humbly handed over the sub-machine-gun to his companion and dropped down near the fire upon which he had tossed a fresh supply of fuel. Secretly he was meaning to be up at peep of day before Suzanne would be stirring, in order to drag the victim of his fusilade some distance away from their camp so that her curious eyes might not be offended by sight of the wreck of a little harmless prairie dog.

The balance of that wonderful night, spent alongside the Colorado in the famous canyon of the painted walls, passed without a single thing happening to further disturb them.

In the east, where the mounain peaks made a ragged horizon, the first faint fingers of pink were commencing to streak the low heavens when Jack saw his chum moving off toward the spot where lay the victim of his deadly aim. He instinctively understood what Perk was aiming to do and on that account refrained from calling out or otherwise taking any notice of his being abroad.

When Perk came back ten minutes later and washed his hands down at the river brink, Jack only chuckled, as though it tickled him to notice how the flinty-hearted Perk—only with regard to his indifference toward all female persons—had discovered that there might still be a few —not many, perhaps—girls who were sincere and loyal to the one to whom they had pledged their hearts—lucky Buddy Warner, with all this uncertainty regarding his fate—at the worst there would be *some one* to always mourn his passing.

On came the day, and Perk busied himself in geting a good cooking fire going, remembering what a delicious supper the girl had prepared on the preceding evening; and his mouth now fair-

ly watering with hopes of another turn at that royal ambrosia which some people without sentiment will call plain "coffee."

Suzanne presently joined them, after washing her pretty face down at the running water, which was icy cold, and most refreshing indeed. Then she busied herself at the fire, ordered the meek and obedient Perk around after the manner of most petty and pretty kitchen tyrants; but the fine odors that were soon filling the rarified air buoyed up Perk's spirits wonderfully and he raised no rebellion.

And the breakfast to which they soon sat down was just as delicious as fancy had pictured; indeed, the only thing amiss so far as the ravenous Perk could discover was the fact that it might give out before all of them had had a sufficiency.

"Now, let's get busy transferring that gas to our tank, Perk," Jack observed, as they finally arose. "We'll have to get our boat up on the shore, you observe—a case of Mahomet going to the mountain—let's go, partner."

This was not so difficult as it might seem; for the sandy shore was shelving, and once Jack gave her the gun the amphibian literally "walked up" to where they wanted her to be, alongside the Stinson-Detroiter plane.

Perk produced a length of small rubber tub-

ing, and made use of it as a siphon. Once the gasoline was started, by suction—Perk attended to that part by sucking the air all out, and getting a mouthful of liquid to pay him for his trouble, which he ejected with a grimace—it continued to flow until the tank aboard the amphibian was plumb full.

"I can scare up several five-gallon empty tins," suggested the wise Perk, "that might be filled, and stowed away somewhere—that would give us a reserve stock, plenty I guess to carry us to the nearest supply base in case our tank went dry."

"A mighty good idea, boy," was Jack's comment, he being glad to see how the other was recovering from his late depression.

They finally had everything settled—Suzanne had put up her little "sign," to let curious-minded folks wandering that way know who owned the abandoned crate, and that it was to be let absolutely alone until she came to salvage it. Then, too, she had made up her little package of "essentials," which she meant to take along when they zoomed off to start the real search for lost Buddy Warner.

As they settled down in their places, room having been found for the girl pilot, Suzanne waved her hand a bit sadly toward her impotent crate,

as though certain high hopes she had been entertaining were now fallen in ruins; then she smiled again, watching closely to see Jack gripping the stick and letting in the gas to the attendant spark, when they were off.

CHAPTER XX

AN UNSUBDUED SPIRIT

Backed by plenty of daylight there was no difficulty at all experienced in mounting. The sand was packed quite hard as sometimes happens at the seashore, particularly in highly favored localities like down at Daytona Beach on the eastern coast of Florida, where the speed races are run every season. After the wheels contained in the aluminum pontoons left the ground not a single obstacle stood in the way of their climbing steadily upward, until presently they could look out over the sweep of rough country surrounding that strangest of all Dame Nature's trick pictures—the Colorado Canyon.

Jack had his plans all laid out, built upon his charts, and the general fund of knowledge gleaned from some of the newspaper accounts that he had kept by him; after shuffling the pack, and discarding all unsupported versions as unreliable guides for stranger air pilots to go by.

Having set the course Jack had Perk handle the stick, for it was his intention to have a good

talk with Suzanne, something he had not managed to accomplish thus far.

She understood just what he had in mind when he took up one end of the earphone harness, and made motions; for the racket was too fierce to think of trying to make his ordinary speaking voice heard—indeed, she had already shown a certain amount of curiosity concerning the apparatus, possibly knowing what it was intended for, although never herself having as yet had occasion to make use of such a means of communication when in flight.

He soon had the straps adjusted to suit her small head, and then proceeded to arrange his own end. His main purpose was far from being connected with anything like curiosity, for somehow he had a faint hope something she could tell him might open up a line of reasoning, and produce a live clue, which was just what was lacking in his plans.

"I'm meaning to ask you some questions, Miss Cramer," he went on to say; "in hopes that you may be able to give me some little valuable hint; for up to now everybody must be working more or less in the dark. You see, all that's known to be positive is that Buddy took off from a certain station where he delivered some important mail, picked up a local sack, and then took off at a specified hour and minute. After that he was

not heard from again—failed to show up at either of the succeeding stations, and was awaited in vain at the end of his run.

"For a time nothing much was thought of his delay in turning up; because of any one of several things that might have held him back—fog, head winds, or some trifling trouble compelling him to make a forced landing, which in this dreadful country of rocks and gullies among mountain peaks usually is attended by serious difficulties, especially the getting off again when the trouble has been attended to."

Then he went on to tell her what he had deducted, after carefully getting the gist of what all the newspaper men had discovered up to within twenty-four hours of the present time; the deeply interested girl listening eagerly, and occasionally nodding her head, as though quite agreeing with his reasoning.

"Now," Jack went on to say—after bringing his story down to where he and Perk had received their orders from Washington, took off, butted against a most tenacious fog belt, and finally brought up at the Canyon, where they made her acquaintance—"Tell me please, when and how you first heard that Buddy was missing, if it would not be too painful a recital."

"Oh! that will not keep me from speaking,"

she hastened to say, trying bravely to keep the tears from dimming her eyes: "nothing could be too painful for me to endure if only it works to *his* good in the end. We read the dreadful news in the daily paper that comes to Ma Warner's home every morning, it being mailed in the big city not a hundred miles away. She always hunts up the aviation column the very first thing. Why not, when she has an only son who is known as an experienced and reliable air-mail pilot and also knows that she is going to have a second ambitious flyer in the family soon, if all goes well, and I find Buddy.

"Of course we were very apprehensive, what with the neighbors running in to sympathize, and cheer us up. Later on that same day a reporter from the very paper in which we read the first news about Buddy, turned up, having motored over across country, eager to pick up enough interesting facts at the humble home of Buddy's anxious mother to make a thrilling story for his editor.

"They have been saying some very kind things about our Buddy since he disappeared so suddenly and mysteriously. He was one of the best liked air-pilots in the whole corps, I read again and again; and oh! what a thrill it gave us both to realize how he was even being compared to Lindbergh himself. Could anything be said to

make a mother's heart thrill more with joy—or that of Buddy's best girl also?

"To be sure," she went on, with a winsome little smile, "he had never done anything great, to make him famous, in the way of wonderful stunts, or long perilous flights over wide oceans, and such, but every one seemed to know how his heart has always been wrapped up in the cause of aviation, and that he would be willing to lay down his very life if by doing so he could advance the day when flying will be much safer than going by train or boat."

Jack soon realized that there was no hope of learning anything from this source capable of opening up a promising line of thought. Suzanne was only too eager to tell everything she knew, but after all it amounted only to an exhibition of her affection. How she conceived the madcap idea of herself starting out, "only a half-baked pilot" she called herself in humiliation, just hoping that something—she knew not what, for it would have to be in the nature of a near miracle, as Jack very well know—would have to come along to draw her to where her Buddy must be lying, waiting and praying for needful aid.

Jack knew very well, although not for worlds would he have hinted at such a thing in her hearing, that since three full days had by this

time gone by, poor Buddy must long since have passed on. Unless of course some Good Samaritan had found him where he lay injured and perhaps starving, and taken him in charge. A happy accident like this was one chance in a thousand because of the uninhabited wilderness.

She had pictured the old mother striving to believe God would surely keep her boy safe in the hollow of His omnipotent hand, so that Jack had to wink pretty fast in order not to let her see the tears in his own eyes—such confidence and assurance was really beautiful; and for one thing it caused Jack to resolve more than ever to let no ordinary obstacle daunt him—for the sake of that fond mother and this courageous if ill-advised young lady who just refused to yield to despondency even when the skies looked most gloomy, and hope hung by just a slender shred.

"Depend upon it, Miss Cramer," he told her, gently, after he realized that nothing was to be gained by pressing her with further questioning; "both Perk and myself are booked in this game, and we mean to leave no stone unturned in trying to find Buddy. Others who are engaged in the search will make all manner of sacrifices too. So great is the warmth of feeling for that faithful mother who is forced to stay at home, and leave the sacred task to strangers. If concerted effort is able to accomplish anything we'll suc-

ceed; if all our efforts fail us, you must try and believe it is for some wise purpose which we cannot see with the weak human eyes."

She looked at him with an expression that made Jack realize how much of her confident spirit was make believe—that deep down in her sensible heart she knew very well what terrific chances there were against success coming to reward their efforts—that much of this had been assumed in the hope of buoying up the falling hopes of that poor mother, left bereft of her only boy, the stay and pride of her aging years.

He saw her clamp her white teeth together as if forcing herself to brush aside that sinking feeling, and show the old dauntless spirit that had thus far carried her safely through a sea of doubts and fears.

When she spoke again it was with a ring in her voice that thrilled him to the core—he only wished he could take on a measure of that indomitable nature that would not give up.

"But we'll find him," she was saying, slowly but fiercely; "I just know we will, that's all—his mother needs him, his only girl needs him, and we've *got* to bring him back to his old home—alive, or—dead!"

CHAPTER XXI

COMBING THE MOUNTAIN-TOPS

Jack admitted to feeling a trifle disappointed when his talk with Suzanne afforded no signs of a clue upon which to build a structure; although truth to tell he realized how almost absurd that hope had been.

Surely Buddy's disappearance could hardly hinge upon anything that had ever taken place in his old home town—such a cheery, companionable lad could not have any enemies — Suzanne had not hinted at such a thing as a jealous rival in the field, who might give way to wicked thoughts.

No, the whole occurrence must be what everybody believed—a sheer accident, such as was liable to happen to any air pilot braving the elements day and night in the pursuit of his regular vocation. He had gone down, so now the only trouble was to locate the scene of his mishap and, as Perk at another time had been heard to say "pick up the pieces," meaning no offense by such a remark.

"If you don't mind," the girl was saying short-

ly afterwards, "I'd like very much to be allowed to use your glasses. I possess good vision, and perhaps the great stake I have in this search might make me argus-eyed indeed."

"Certainly you may make use of them," Jack told her, reaching out to secure the binoculars, showing her how to work them to meet with the best results. "If you do happen to see something that excites your interest, just call our attention to it—sometimes two pair of eyes are better than one, you know, Miss Cramer."

So she sat there, staring down as they moved swifly through the realms of space; but not too swiftly. She seemed to be trying to cover all the ground possible, ever and anon lifting her gaze to sweep a look at more distant objects.

Again and again she would stop in her movements as if to concentrate her scrutiny upon one particular spot; Jack, watching with sympathy filling his heart, could imagine how the poor girl must be suffering even though failing to show it. He would feel a spasm of eagerness on each occasion of special scrutiny only to lose it again as she continued her search of the grim countryside that was so bleak and so unpromising.

Meantime Jack was keeping one eye on the lower heavens, with the expectation of sooner or

later discovering some far distant moving object, that he would know must be some other air craft, doubtless engaged in the same mission of humanity and mercy that employed all their own efforts.

It turned out that he had not held these expectations in vain, for along about the middle of the morning such a tiny blur was discovered far away, which grew somewhat larger as the minutes passed.

Upon calling the girl's attention to the moving object that to the unaided eye might just as well have been set down as a wheeling buzzard, she quickly pronounced it to be a plane, sweeping at a low altitude above the rocky mountain peaks, as though those aboard were scrutinizing the depths and heights that lay underneath, just as she had been doing.

She cast frequent eager glances in that direction, while not allowing her interest in the wild terrain over which they continued to pass, to slacken. Jack could detect a certain wistfulness in the way she watched, just as though she might be wishing them all the favors of Heaven in meeting with success.

The ship swung around, and went off in another direction, as though the pilot might be following out certain ideas of his own. While

it was yet in plain sight, though growing fainter in the lower haze, she uttered a low cry, and said excitedly:

"Oh! look Jack, look over in the north—another ship, and a cabin biplane at that. Do you think they are working on the same lines as the rest of us?"

Jack reached out a hand for the binoculars, and took a good survey; after which he announced that everything seemed to point that way.

"They're keeping low down, also moving quite slowly; and if on a regular flight they would be doing neither of those things, you understand. Yes, and I have no doubt that within a hundred-and-fifty miles of this spot in every direction there are twenty—thirty such ships, large and small, with each pilot doing everything in his power to be the lucky one to find your Buddy."

She continued to observe the two planes as if lost in serious thought, to finally say with a little catch in her voice, for she still had the earphone harness attached to her head:

"I wish them every success possible; for it does not matter who the lucky pilot is, every one of them will be remembered as long as I live. The only thing that counts is to find *him*—alive!"

As if to emphasize the yearning that was in

her heart the girl stretched out both hands toward the two distant ships; and there was something so pathetic in the mute action that neither of the other would ever forget.

Then, as though just as sanguine as ever she accepted the glasses from Jack to continue scanning the ground they were passing over, hoping to sooner or later meet with a glorious success.

Jack himself was far from feeling the same enthusiasm—doubtless it was because of his superior knowledge of the vast difficulties staring them rudely in the face; then again he did not have that true love for Buddy buoying him up, as was the case with Suzanne.

Perk was thinking that since noon had rolled around it might be just as well that they munched a trifle of food, so as to conserve their strength, with a long task ahead of them, when once again the girl uttered a cry. Perk not being equipped just then with ear-phones could not catch what she was saying so excitedly; but at least he was able to surmise its tenor—she had undoubtedly made some sort of discovery, for her face was marked by animation, and she kept pointing down toward some part of the rocky country, trying to direct Jack's attention to it.

Perk saw his chum take the binoculars and

follow up the particular line in which Suzanne was pointing. Long and earnestly did he stare, with her eager eyes glued on his face. Then Jack sadly shook his head, as if deciding in the negative.

Whatever it was she had seen to thus arouse false hopes his good sense told him it was not worthy of their further investigation. This naturally caused her to be bitterly disappointed, although she managed to bear up bravely, and even smiled whimsically—pitifully Perk called it, for he was deeply interested in the wild search, and hoping with all his heart it might turn out successful, though his good sense and training told him only a near miracle could accomplish this.

None of them seemed to have much appetite save Perk, and that always hungry individual was never known to refuse an opportunity to treat his clamoring "tummy" to an extra meal—Suzanne hardly touched a morsel and when Jack tried to persuade her that she owed it to herself to eat, she shook her head and told him it would choke her if she did.

Then once more was the everlasting vigil resumed—indeed, while the others munched a snack the girl had kept the glasses almost constantly employed, as though under the conviction

that if any slackening of her observation came about that might prove to be the undoing of the whole scheme—a chain is only as strong as its weakest link; and ten minutes relaxation in the way of covering the ground they were passing over might be fatal to their success.

Again about the middle of the afternoon she once more believed she saw something calling for a closer scrutiny. This time she was not so excited as on the previous occasion, possibly taking warning; but she pressed the binoculars on Jack—Perk still handling the controls—and directed his attention to what she believed was a smudge of smoke arising from amidst the side of a steep mountain where the rocks were piled up as though giants had been playing ten pins.

Once more did Jack bend all his energies to figuring out what the smoke could mean; he disliked telling her it did not offer any real hope, for he could see that it was the end of a forest fire, such as may have been tailing up the long ravine for many days, and feeding on all manner of trash falling from the scraggy pinon trees that managed to cling to the otherwise bare walls.

The poor forlorn girl broke down and cried bitterly when once more her hopes were dashed to the ground. Perk shook his head, and gritted his teeth, for it greatly disturbed him to hear her weeping; Jack tried to comfort her as best he

could, in a man's clumsy way. Soon the fit wore away, and Suzanne was her own brave little self again, the look of sublime confidence once more coming into her face. And so the weary hunt went on as the sun slanted down the western heavens, with a cruel night ahead of the searchers.

CHAPTER XXII

AN AIR-MAIL WAY STATION

Once they sighted an isolated town in a valley, but this failed to arouse any particular enthusiasm. If anything had been seen by those who lived in such a remote place, the glad tidings would have long since been sent out to the world, since it must be understood how the entire country was alive with eagerness for a satisfactory solution to the mysterious disappearance of the young air-mail pilot.

Jack rather imagined that this might be the place where Buddy Warner turned up missing—where at a certain hour his schedule was to have brought him down from his sky trail to leave and pick up the mail—but alas! he had failed to come to time, and day after day an increasing number of scurrying planes continued to scour the surrounding country in the endeavor to pick up a clue.

Jack could make out the landing field with his naked eyes but when Suzanne pressed the glasses on him without saying a word, he proceeded to make good use of them.

A plane had just landed, possibly in the mail service, for there was more or less bustle in its vicinity and he could see a small Ford car starting off, as if with a bag or two of letters.

Apparently their passing over failed to excite the people, for while they were staring up and displaying a certain amount of interest, they made no signals, showing there was no good news, as possibly the girl had been hoping.

"They have been seeing any number of ships passing over during the last few days, I reckon," he told her, just to have something to say, and perhaps also relieve her evident distress a little, "so understand that nothing has been found, or the joyful news would be transmitted by radio or wire."

Taking it for granted that he had figured correctly, Jack altered his plans. If Buddy had never made his goal and delivered the mail at this station, the chances seemed to be that he could hardly have gone past — that whatever happened to him must have occurred before he came to this place.

This being the case, they would show the part of wisdom to swing around and start back the way they had come. It would be a good policy to zigzag back and forth so as to cover all the ground possible. Jack had taken particular care

to find out what he could as to the sort of night it was when the disappearance took place. Whether there was any kind of bad weather and which way the prevailing wind chanced to be blowing, for that must be taken into consideration in order to get as close to the facts as possible.

So now when about to head back, he knew just which side of their late course must call for their serious attention. Another thing he kept before him was the important fact of eight or ten hours apparently wasted. Night was approaching and they could not have even the slightest hope of making any sort of discovery.

Since in following out his new plan of swinging back and forth each few miles, covering only short distances ahead, by the time twilight fell they would not be a great distance from the valley in which that town on the air-mail route nestled. What was to hinder them seeking it out again, and finding a safe harbor for the hours of darkness?

When he found a chance to talk with Perk, changing the ear phones from the girl to his chum, now resting up after a continuous service of many hours, the latter absolutely agreed with everything Jack advanced.

"Shucks! we couldn't 'spect to strike anything

while the night lasted, just keep moseyin' around to kill time an' in that way usin' up a whole bunch o' gas, 'sides mebbe losin' track o' our job. Yep, I'd say it'd be a good thing all 'round for us to drop down an' give the girl a chance to rest."

That seemed to settle it, insofar as Jack was concerned for it was always good in his mind to have his partner agree with him, Perk being no fool but an experienced airman of many years standing.

The seesaw movement gave them an opportunity to cover considerable ground, even while they made but scant forward progress. Jack was not at all concerned about this lack, his one desire being to effectually scour the country so as to feel they had not been lax in their duty.

He took mental notes as they went along, so as to always remember just what course must be pursued in order to fetch them back to the cozy little valley set like a gem in the heart of that inhospitable mountain territory. This was only in keeping with Jack's customary system of preparedness. A habit that had proven most valuable to him more than a few times in the past.

They were once again over the high elevations so that it was necessary to change their altitude frequently in order to keep within reasonable

distance of the ground which they were searching for a clue. Now they had to climb in order to clear a lofty peak and immediately afterwards drop down so as to comb the further side of the rocky height, as well as the deep ravine lying between the several mountains in the mighty chain.

It was interesting work, but with such slight chances for success, much of the glamour was lost for Jack. As the friendly sun was about to drop behind the western horizon, so jagged, so fantastic in contour, they must soon give up the flight for that day and hasten back to the valley town where a safe landing could be effected and a decent meal secured, something to tempt poor, disconsolate and yet brave Suzanne to break her long fast.

Already it was growing difficult to distinguish objects in some of the canyons and defiles over which they sailed, indicating that they might be missing something of value. Accordingly Jack swung abruptly around and rising like an eagle on the wing, started to go back.

He could see that Suzanne noticed this abrupt change in their course for she displayed some uneasiness. He motioned to Perk to let her have the earphones again and proceeded to explain just what must be done.

At first the girl was distressed, for to her mind it looked as though her staunch friends might be growing weary of their hopeless quest and meant to abandon it altogether, but as Jack carefully explained why it was necessary they should land for the night while the opportunity offered and that nothing would be sacrificed in so doing, Suzanne began to comprehend and nod her head in approval.

"We can stop over and get rested up instead of keeping on this gruelling task without the slightest chance for accomplishing anything," he told her finally, though immediately adding: "that covers the night only, for as soon as morning comes we shall start out, fixed to keep going all day long."

"I understand just what you mean, Jack, and I don't know how to thank you both for all you are doing for me—for Buddy—for Ma Warner, waiting there at home and hardly sleeping a wink as she thinks and thinks and prays her boy may be given back to her safe and sound."

Jack did not say any more, he could not because by now his own hopes were diminishing at a rapid rate. Was it any wonder that such should be the case when three full days had now crept along since the air-mail pilot vanished into the realms of space, and never a single word coming back to explain his fate?

For the sake of this brave girl, so ready to risk her own life in the service of the one she loved, he must try to keep up a confident front. If it was ordained that she too must see her hopes crushed, at least he and Perk would have the satisfaction of knowing they had done everything in their power to bring her great joy. So too, that anxious mother in the far away home, what gratification it would give them if they could dry her tears and be helpful in bringing her boy back to her arms.

They were now nearing the valley where the little way-station on the air-mail route lay between its majestic sentinel snow-clad peaks. Jack meant to circle twice at least, so as to get a good idea as to how the ground lay for by now daylight would be giving place to dusk in that valley, and visibility not all they could wish, so it would pay them to be very careful.

Jack could see that Suzanne was greatly interested and he knew just why. Here at this mountain station, Buddy was in the habit of landing every time his flight took him back and forth. Doubtless he had made friends with some of the town folks, especially those connected with the flying field for his was a nature that always attracted people. It agitated her to realize that she might even hear him spoken of in the highest

terms, and what pride such a thing must stir up in her young heart!

Jack was circling the field and constantly dropping lower with each round so that he had already been able to pick out the exact spot where he meant to land.

CHAPTER XXIII

PERK LOSES HIS VOICE

Knowing that one of Perk's failings lay along the line of talking a bit too much on occasion, Jack had taken pains to warn him against too much loquacity when making a night halt in this mountain town.

He had had occasion to take his pal to task along similar lines more than a few times in the past. Perk was too apt to forget that secrecy was always a leading card with all reliable members of the service in which he was enlisted.

That he emphasized this fact on the present occasion did not mean there was a particular reason for keeping the lid on, lest some desperate character hiding in the isolated place from the long arm of the Government's deputies try to do them harm—but simply on general principles.

Only too well did Jack know there were men who had reason to hate all having any connection whatever with the Secret Service—men who had been sent to Atlanta or Leavenworth, to pay the debt they owed organized society. Through the entire period of their incarceration never a

day had passed without their renewing a vow to sometime or other to get even with the members of that organization responsible for their imprisonment.

When their wheels came in contact with the ground in a perfect three point landing, they found themselves greeted by a number of men, ready to proffer any assistance that might be required, especially when it became known that the strangers intended to stay over night.

The presence of a girl pilot aboard the visiting craft also aroused additional curiosity for likely enough this may have been the very first time the town had ever played host to a genuine aviatrix.

Perk, to make doubly certain he did not babble, decided to play dumb as much as lay within his power. He could talk hoarsely as though suffering from a bad cold and loss of voice, a tricky game that gave him secret amusement, Jack rather suspected.

Jack soon learned they would surely find good accommodations at one of the hotels and a man who introduced himself as Caleb Cushman kindly volunteered to carry them there in his five-passenger car, handily near by.

This neighborly offer Jack immediately accepted, asking the other if he could wait a few minutes until some arrangement was made for

storing their crate in a convenient hangar. Everybody seemed eager to oblige, and Jack really had to choose between three separate generous offers from as many parties.

He had already discovered that a man wearing a pilot's outfit and who seemed to be in some authority, named Bart Hicks, was in addition to being in charge of the field, an instruction pilot whenever some young fellow aspired to learn the ropes, after fulfilling the examination necessary to being licensed as a full-fledged air pilot.

So it was the part of diplomacy on Jack's part, when forced to make a choice, to accept this man's offer under the belief that the amphibian would be better cared for and secured against any possibility of harm. Of course he had no reason whatever to fear any rough-house treatment, but long years ago young Ralston had learned the wisdom of "locking the door *before* the horse was stolen" and thereby saved himself considerable trouble.

An air pilot's ship is to him what the valuable race-horse represents to the track plunger—a thing to be guarded at all times as the day of the great turf events draws closer since some desperate gambler might attempt to dope the animal in order to win his heavy wagers.

So too, it would be a simple thing to disable

the motor of a plane or else so damage a wing that it must be out of the question for the craft to pursue its customary duties until it had been taken to a repair shop and put in condition. With time so valuable to them, so vital to Buddy Warner, they could not afford to take any chances.

Before he quitted the landing-field, he made up his mind to have a little confidential talk with Bart Hicks whom he had already sized up to be an honest, efficient airman to whom any one could tie with an assurance of being given a square deal.

"Perk, stick close to Suzanne—I'll be back in a short time," was what he said to his chum. The other wagged his head as though he understood, even though there must be a certain amount of deafness on his part, caused by the continual racket of the motor and propeller, lasting from the time they took off in the gigantic Colorado Canyon.

A number of willing hands took hold, and the big amphibian was shoved and hauled to a large hangar in which one ship had already been berthed. Jack incidentally learned that the doors would be closed immediately and locked, although no harm had ever been done a ship since the airport was established.

Jack had already noted that they were getting to be up to the times, as if the citizens might be of

an enterprising sort. Landing lights had been installed while a flashing beacon close by had already started into action, showing that an air-mail crate was expected any minute or else one was due to take off.

It was evident that Bart Hicks felt a certain amount of natural curiosity concerning these guests of the field. He had noted that their ship was a brand new one and also the fact that the pilot who brought it down so cleverly must be an experienced hand. Then too, the presence of Suzanne interested him in the bargain, she looked so confident and had all the little airs of a full-fledged pilot in the bargain—trust his old eyes to discover these patent facts.

"Come far, sir?" he was saying casually after the ship had been safely housed in the big hangar, doubtless the property of the aircraft company contracting with the Government for carrying the mails and express matter.

"We spent last night in the Colorado Canyon and have been covering all the ground possible ever since, flying low so as to keep tabs on the ground for as you might guess, we're one of the many parties out searching high and low for Buddy Warner and his crate."

"I reckoned you might be sir," the superintendent of the field quickly remarked, displaying more or less sympathy in his voice.

"My pal and I have been thrown into the hunt by our employers like the rest of the bunch working the same racket," continued Jack, diplomatically adding, "you see we happen to have run across a young woman pilot who had to make a forced landing down on the river sand in the canyon and it was absolutely necessary that we take her along with us. You can understand just why that could be when I tell you her name is Suzanne Cramer and that she is Buddy Warner's sweetheart!"

Bart immediately displayed the most intense interest it seemed, just as wise Jack had figured out. He was a family man and in full sympathy with everything that had to do with the fortunes of honest, clean minded young people—for Jack knew there was a heap of truth in that old saying to the effect that "all the world loves a lover" and he was now playing the game for all it was worth.

"That's mighty fine I must say, Mr. Ralston," Bart said, for he had learned the names of the two airmen, "and I must say that girl is some daisy, to start off searching for her beau, and she an air pilot in the bargain. I'm tickled pink to have you all stay over in our little burg for even a night and if we can do anything to help you out just give me the tip and it'll sure be done."

That was just what Jack most wanted to hear.

Before they took off again he was determined to do his best to get hold of some information that would prove of more or less value to himself and Perk.

"I'm meaning to ask you a few questions in the morning Mr. Hicks," he hastened to say, "especially connected with the country to the east and northeast, for I figure the chances are three to one Buddy Warner must have made a forced landing of some sort in that quarter. The wind, the night he vanished, was blowing from the southwest and pretty gusty at times. Visibility was poor also, so if he lost connection with the beacons before reaching your station, he'd be blown off his course. Do you agree with me, sir?"

"I call it right smart reasoning," Bart Hicks told him. "Three other ships dropped in here nights so as to save their gas and get some rest; and not one of the pilots seemed to know what course he ought to lay out—just kept swinging this way and that at random, hoping for a streak of good luck to strike them. I reckoned they were leaving a lot of ground uncovered, working without any system as they did."

"That's what I thought would happen," continued Jack quietly, feeling that he had already made a good impression on the other and could hope for results when it came time to "squeeze

the bag." "We mean to devote ourselves to that particular locality so as to find out where he crashed and whether he is still alive or not."

Bart Hicks gave a shrug with his broad shoulders.

"For the sake of that little girl, I sure do hope you find him alive, partner," he said feelingly as became one airman toward another.

"She came straight out here from his old mother," continued Jack, "who gave her blessing to the mad scheme; but now that she is in our charge, my pal and I will see that she comes to no harm. I am greatly obliged to you, Mr. Hicks, for your kindness in sheltering our ship. You can understand what it means to us now, while on this sad errand ot mercy, to know that no harm will happen to the crate."

"Don't mention it partner!" hastily exclaimed the other. "Why, I've been just itching right along to get busy and look over that territory you've been speaking about, but my duties here kept me pinned down, though I took it out in doing a heap of growling and swearing too. Tell the little girl for me, will you, that we've all been wishing her Buddy would turn up safe and sound. I have a daughter about her age, I reckon, and I just know how she must feel. See you in the morning at daybreak, Mr. Ralston."

"Thank you again many times, sir."

Jack felt that he had made a warm friend in honest Bart Hicks. He saw the respectful way in which the field superintendent shook hands with Suzanne, after all of them had entered the gentleman's car and were ready to start for the hotel and how pleased the girl looked as he murmured a few words of sincere sympathy. Things at least seemed to be working along the line he had laid out. Of course, no one could say this early in the game whether anything worth while would develop from the circumstances springing out of their decision to spend the night in the valley town.

CHAPTER XXIV

ONE CHANCE IN A THOUSAND

The little hotel to which they were taken by the kind owner of the five-passenger car proved to be all they could wish for. It looked scrupulously clean and the rooms to which they were shown seemed to give promise of a comfortable night's sleep, though Jack doubted whether the excited girl would obtain the rest she needed so much.

He promised to knock on her door at daybreak so that they might secure the early breakfast he had ordered and be off to the flying field to make a start.

He and Perk had a double room with twin beds and were not long in turning in, both of them being more or less tired after a gruelling day aloft. Jack had no idea they would be disturbed during the night, for they were utter strangers in the town and such things as robberies were absolutely unknown, or so the hotel proprietor had assured him in answer to an incidental question.

He was up at the first peep of dawn and had

Perk on his feet without any unusual racket. Later on Jack kept his promise about tapping on the door of Suzanne's room and was a bit surprised when she opened it, disclosing the fact that she was fully dressed as though she had been up for some time, which indeed was a fact.

He would never forget the yearning look she gave him when, seated at the table, they started their simple breakfast. It was as though her heart were in her throat, choking her and Jack, realizing the girl must be close to the breaking point, quickly started talking of outside matters and even cracked a little joke to try and divert her mind from the subject that had gripped her day and night for so long.

About the time they settled their account and were ready to start for the field, a car stopped at the door and their accommodating friend of the night before, Mr. Caleb Cushman, accompanied by his wife, appeared. They came early to have the pleasure of taking them to where they meant to start off again—perhaps his good wife also wished to meet the brave girl who was the now famous Buddy Warner's sweetheart. Apparently they both knew about this important fact, showing that Mr. Cushman must have been in touch with Bart Hicks by telephone since last they saw the latter, and learned this thrilling circumstance that might put their little town on

the map, with all the big newspapers of the country blazing inch high scareheads on their front pages when covering the latest sensation along aviation lines.

Although Jack would not admit that he felt the least uneasiness concerning the safety of the amphibian, nevertheless he gave a sigh of relief when after looking the ship over he found everything in shipshape condition.

"Get that gas aboard as quick as you can, Perk," he told his comrade for he had contracted to have the tank filled to full capacity while the chance held good, and besides he wished to have a little further conversation with affable Bart Hicks, with the hope of picking up a few crumbs of information in regard to the terrain they meant to cover on this most important day.

Accordingly he drew the ground superintendent aside and plied him with a variety of questions, all of which the accommodating test pilot answered to the best of his ability.

Jack had him describe the general character of the ground and just as he anticipated, learned that it was actually the roughest section in all the region.

"Rocks—deep gullies that seem to have no bottom—peaks with slithering points that look like the savage steel tips of spearheads — the worst territory for a poor devil of an air pilot to

crash in or have to make a forced landing that you could run across in a hundred square miles. I'd say there wasn't over one chance in a thousand that the lad could get to the ground alive and even granted that he did, wounded as he must be, he never in the wide world would be able to find his way out of that hole. I'm sorry to have to say that, Mr. Ralston, but it's the truth."

Jack may have winced, but just the same he showed not the slightest sign of being yellow.

"Tell me about that thousandth chance, brother," he observed, at which the other looked him keenly in the face, shrugged his shoulders and went on to say:

"Guess you're clear grit all right, son. The best pilots are built that way. Look at our Lindy now, and you'll find he never flinches, no matter what happens but always does the one right thing as if by instinct. Fact is, when I mentioned that there might be a tiny loophole for a poor devil who had to go down in that god-forsaken stretch of wilderness, I must have been thinking of that strange old hermit who has a secret hideout somewhere in that country. There's a beautiful little clear water lake surrounded by peaks and heavy woods that no white man's ever fished in or set eyes on at close quarters, 'cept maybe that queer old chap."

"Please tell me all you know about him," pursued Jack eagerly, just as if he was trying to clutch some minute shred of hope that was difficult to capture.

Bart Hicks laughed shortly.

"I can tell you all that in a jiffy Mr. Ralston," he hastened to reply, "because none of us happen to know anything at all about who and what the old party is. About twice a year, spring and fall, he bobs up here with a sure footed mule and buys all sorts of grub and stores. He never stays overnight and seems to hate the sight of a real house. Some curious minded folks, thinking that perhaps he had struck a rich mine there in that rockhouse district, have tried to follow him but had to give it up and come back beaten. He doesn't fetch free gold out with him but plain, everyday Government yellowback bills. We don't know a thing about the secret trail he takes to make his way through all that riotous land.

"I've heard pilots tell how they'd seen spirals of wood smoke rising and those who happened to be flying low say they could see his campfire was close to the brim of that crater lake—for some say it lies in the crater of an extinct volcano. That's about the whole story as far as any of us know it, Mr. Ralston and I'm winding up by saying again it would be just one lone chance in a thousand that a poor air pilot dropping

down there would be found and rescued by that mysterious old hermit."

"As you say, it's a desperately small opening and not very promising at best," Jack told his new friend with the same resolute look on his face, "but it may be we'll have to place our hopes on such a slender chance after all. At any rate I'm meaning to look into that matter before giving up the game as impossible. It wouldn't be the first time such a mere thread turned into a stout cable that's saved the ship from destruction."

"Never say die, eh? I'd think that'd be your motto, Mr. Ralston," observed the field superintendent who apparently had come to have more or less admiration for the young air pilot who carried himself so buoyantly, so confidently, as though he absolutely believed in himself.

By now Perk had finished his job of refueling the plane and was rubbing his soiled hands with a bit of waste.

"All fixed, are we brother?" asked Jack and for almost the first time on record, those close by learned that Perk was not at all dumb, but had a fluent voice of his own.

"Wall," he drawled with a wicked wink toward Jack, "guess now she's loaded to capacity an' then some 'cause I've got six gallon cans o' juice stowed away where they ain't goin' to take

up much room, an'll keep us on the wing a bit extra. Then too, partner, here's a waiter comin' from our hotel joint carryin' a package o' eats in the shape o' sandwiches which I took the trouble to order an' which you'll have the pleasure o' payin' a hull dollar for right on the spot."

"Good for you, Perk!" laughed Jack, who seldom had to worry about a sufficiency of food when traveling in the company of such an excellent provider as Gabe Perkiser who never had any difficulty in hearing the "call of the eats" so many times per diem.

Apparently they were all ready to make the jump-off, the amphibian having been taxied to the head of the runway where a simple slant would help give her "gangway," as Perk often called it.

Just then Bart Hicks came up and shoved a bit of paper into the pocket of Jack's leather flying coat.

"Just take a squint at that when you find time, brother," he remarked and held out his hand for a parting grip. "Shake hands, Jack, and here's wishing you all the luck going in your present job as well as in all others they put on your shoulders—you too, Perk old hoss."

There was something a bit mysterious about the way Bart Hicks said that, and Perk had it on the tip of his tongue to demand an explanation

but since the pilot just then drew back the stick and the motor commenced to roar as the amphibian started down the slant, he had to take it out in a goodbye wave of his hand and let it go at that.

They rose like a bird long before the termination of the runway had been reached for those sloping wing-tips were fashioned so as to make it easy to take off successfully in one-third the distance formerly deemed necessary for a ship with a powerful enough set of motors to lift a heavy weight and get away with it.

Looking back, Suzanne could see the little bunch that had seen their takeoff, including some mechanics and field hands as well as Bart Hicks, Mr. Cushman and his wife. They were all waving their hands wildly and possibly giving tongue in the bargain, although the noise prevented her from making sure of this. She answered their salutes with her little pocket handkerchief and then wiped her eyes as though the long repressed tears just would break through her guard, and run down her pretty cheeks.

They were now fully launched on another day's weary though eager search, with no one being qualified to prophesy what the outcome of the new flight would be. Jack had mapped out in his mind the country over which he meant

to fly with little save his own conception to assist him.

One thing was sure, when they had covered a stretch of several miles in a straight run, it could be set down as certain nothing had missed their close attention and that there would be no necessity for returning over the same ground again. This was a fight to a finish and a clean-up as they went along, so Jack kept hugging that tiny hope to his heart and wondered what the eventual outcome of the adventure would prove to be. As yet it was a toss-up, as far as he could see.

CHAPTER XXV

THE NEVER SAY DIE SPIRIT

"Hot ziggetty dog! all set now for another long spin, combin' the country as we go along, eh partner?"

Perk had no sooner arranged his head-phones after seeing that Jack had his fixed for service, than he commenced business at the old stand. Perk was just burning to get certain things out of his system that had been dammed up by his playing dumb on the previous evening.

"So far as I know nothing has been overlooked Perk—if only that left wing aileron doesn't play us a dirty trick and fall off, we'll be alright."

"I tell you I tested it an' it's okay, Jack, don't crab my game if you have any respect for my feelin's. When I say a thing's all to the good it's there, every time."

"Forget it brother, we've both been under a heavy strain lately and apt to show undue anxiety. Today ought to prove which way the wind's going to blow for us. See, already she's at the old job, covering every rod of ground with the pow-

erful glasses. All I can say is I wish her all the luck going, poor kid."

"But just the same you ain't any too—er—sanguine—is that the word I want, partner? A sort o' yearnin', hopin' but kinder afraid things mightn't turn out so well in the end?"

"I get you, Perk, and according to my notion there are three of us in the same boat right now. I'm holding the ship in right along, so we'll make certain nothing gets away from us."

"Yeah, an' by the way Jack, didn't I see our good pal, Bart, stick somethin' in your pocket jest before we skipped off—looked kinder like a piece o' paper to me—did you ask him for his home address or somethin' like that?"

Jack laughed.

"So you saw him do that, did you, old Hawk-eye—no, I didn't ask him for anything in that line—he did more than enough for us as it was."

Perk seemed to be consumed with curiosity which he made no attempt whatever to smother, for after a bit of grunting he went on to say suggestively:

"Huh! that looks a whole lot queer to me, partner. Why should Bart Hicks want to act like he might be an informer, tryin' to hand you a leadin' clue to a smashin' big mystery an' on the sly in the bargain? Huh! seems to me he

must a had some good reason for doin' sech a stunt as that!"

"Thunder! Perk, if you don't make me think of the picture we used to see in the magazine ads, where a baby in a bathtub is reaching out to get hold of a cake of soap with a well known brand on it with the words 'He won't be happy till he gets it.' Right now you're just eaten up with curiosity about that slip of paper Bart crammed down in my pocket and there'll be no peace in the camp till you know its contents."

Perk unblushingly chuckled, as if ready to "acknowledge the corn."

"Lemme have the stick, partner," he hastened to suggest, "I'm jest as fit as a fiddle to lay things out for a few hours, an' mebbe it'll tone me down some."

"Oh! all right brother, here you go then."

The transfer was made "as slick as grease," according to Perk's mind and so Jack felt in his coat pocket to immediately draw out a sheet of paper, evidently torn hastily from an account book, and upon which there was considerable writing, none too legible.

He fastened his eyes on this and Perk could see that whatever the tenor of Bart's secret communication was, it appeared to afford Jack considerable interest. Several times as he read on he nodded his head, as if agreeing with certain

statements in the missive, all of which redoubled poor Perk's eagerness to have a share in the proceedings.

"Well, that certainly takes the cake," Jack was heard to say after he had evidently reached the finish of the note.

"Ain't you goin' to let me in on the fun, partner?" begged the other almost pathetically. "I'm sure all het up with a desire to know what's goin' on."

Jack nodded his head again and then started to relieve his chum's mental burden.

"Seems like the joke's on us, Perk, old boy," he began.

"Joke hey? Bart Hicks played one on his unsuspectin' guests then, did he?" Perk grumbled as if terribly upset. "I didn't think he was that sorter cad."

"Oh! you'll take that back after you find out what I meant by the word 'joke'," Jack hastened to assure him. "Listen, partner, I'm going to read you the whole letter, because it's no easy job to get the hang of Bart's handwriting. Reckon he wasn't great shakes at penmanship when he went to school, for he does spell something fierce, but I'm going to keep this, all right, for it's a cinch Bart outsmarted two fellows who reckon themselves some clever at their business. But listen and grab what he says here."

"Go to it, old hoss," begged the waiting Perk most eagerly.

" 'Hats off, boys—I'm on to your curves okay. Happens I got a younger brother a holding down a job in the same crowd you run with—mebbe you remember young Doug Hicks, him that fetched in all by his lonesome the four ginks makin' up that slick gang of international crooks doin' business as the Keating Bunch'—what d'ye think of that, Perk, Doug Hicks turning out to be the kid brother of our new friend, Bart, isn't that the limit though? Well he goes on this way: *'He often mentioned both you lads in his letters to me, and when you introduced yourselves I just knocked wood, but didn't let on I got the drift of things. But say, don't you worry any, boys, I'll never leak a drop, so your secret is as safe as a new dollar bill. Go to it, and fetch in Buddy Warner, for if anybody can do that, it's bound to be you two. So-long. Your friend, Bart Hicks, all wool and a yard wide.' "*

Perk was making all manner of queer faces as though this wonderful disclosure had taken his breath away but through it all there struggled that happy-go-lucky grin of his, to proclaim his full appreciation of the contents of the flying field test pilot's unique communication.

"Jest what that gink is—all wool and a yard wide—honest goods, you bet every time," he

finally managed to say with numerous chuckles accompanying the words. "Sure we know Doug Hicks, the boy who's goin' to make a name for himself in the Secret Service one o' these days, if he don't get bumped off by some hijacker's lead. Queer what a little ole world this anyhow—kickin' up against Bart Hicks in this jumpin'-off part o' the country. We sure do strike the strangest happenin's in our line o' work, don't we?"

"We certainly do," came the quick reply as Jack folded up his letter and put it carefully away "While you're doing duty brother, I'll get busy with some calculations I have in mind. Keep her headed just as she is, and in half an hour we'll bank and come back along a parallel line, so as to cover all the ground up and down, up and down, through the whole day."

It was gruelling work, but the only possible thing they could do if they meant to make certain that they had investigated every rod of that terrible terrain that lay on every side, looking as though at some remote time in the past, nature had been turning things topsy-turvy and making a mad havoc with the entire land of gigantic rocks and sink holes.

So two whole hours crept along with a number of abrupt turns, now north, again south, steadily covering the ground. But sad to say

there had as yet been discovered nothing to breed sudden hopes and expectations. Haze there had been in patches, owing to some humid condition of the atmosphere in certain quarters, but never the first sign of friendly smoke curling upward in spirals, nor yet a glimpse of any sort of half concealed mountain lake such as had been described to them by Bart Hicks.

It was now drawing on toward the middle of the day and Perk having turned over the controls to his chum at the latter's request, was taking things easy, having relieved Suzanne of the binoculars which he handled with the skill born of long practice.

Several times during the morning the girl had begged Jack to take a look and tell her if she had deceived herself in thinking there was some favorable sign ahead or on either side. Much as he would have loved to confirm her wildest hopes, Jack found himself doomed to give a disappointing answer and so see the look of anguish that passed over her erstwhile eager, smiling face.

The grim truth must be faced—there was no break so far to the monotonous cruelty of the landscape with its unpromising features the only result of all this search.

Then too, other discouraging happenings came along to add to Jack's concern. For one thing,

the wind was increasing and at times striking them head on so as to cause more or less unsteadiness to the flying boat, as well as upsetting certain of his calculations.

This was not at all to Jack's liking and he showed it by his repeated upward glances, as though endeavoring to read the impending weather conditions by the looks and movements of the clouds passing over.

It was also becoming more and more treacherous as their work took them up and down, now soaring above some outlying crag mass and again dipping into a valley that seemed only a fit abode for the grizzly bear in search of lonesome districts where the feared human, with his magic stick that spit fire and smoke and painful missiles, could never come.

Would their entire day be put in without a breath of cheering hope? Must they turn back, and possibly spend yet another dreary night in the little valley town, dispirited and with the poor girl in despair?

It began to look that way, even if worse might not be their portion. So it can be easily understood that when Perk got out some of his sandwiches nobody seemed to be hungry save himself, which deplorable fact was not at all to the genial fellow's liking.

Even the usually even-tempered Jack was be-

ginning to show signs of the long strain, though he managed to conceal it as much as possible out of consideration for the suffering Suzanne; but it was hard to assume a hopeful face when up against a tough proposition as they undoubtedly now were.

The wind was getting stronger, there could be no discounting that positive fact which added to Jack's concern not a little, for he realized that should a storm come along it would put an effectual end to all their hopes of accomplishing anything. Perk too, had taken the alarm and was also sending occasional glances aloft.

CHAPTER XXVI

CRATER LAKE

Along about an hour after Perk had made his lonesome midday lunch and marveled at the fact of his being able to only devour three of those toothsome sandwiches the chef at the hotel had put up at his order, things had arrived at such a point that Jack felt it was only the part of wisdom for him to do whatever lay in his power to keep track of their bearings.

If that rising wind kept on increasing in strength so that it even threatened to wind up in a genuine smashing gale, the chances were they must either make some sort of a forced landing, or else climb up above the storm clouds so as to avoid new and more appalling perils.

In so doing they would lose track of their points of contact and be compelled to go all over the same ground again or take chances of picking up the broken thread of their search wherever they had to drop it.

Thus hard set, Jack began to try and take note of various unusual formations—using the binoculars in so doing—that, stamped on his receptive

mind might serve as landmarks just as "targets" do the harbor pilots when fetching a deep sea vessel in through the shallows to port and safety.

Sometimes small fishing smacks, driven from a promising field by wind and huge billows, are able to mark the spot by an anchored empty water keg and in this way are able to find the fruitful spot when the weather moderates. Such a stratagem however is not available to the air voyager, whose only resource lies in a retentive memory.

When another half hour had slipped by, Jack began to once again entertain a hope that this emergency might not reach a culmination. If anything, the wind had lost a modicum of its fierceness and twice he discovered a little break in the cloud ceiling by which they were covered, as though the sun were trying to peep through.

Thus things were going along as the middle of the afternoon was reached. Perk at the controls was mentally comparing their condition to that of a shipwrecked crew of a sunken vessel; out of water with their hearts almost in their throats with anxiety, shading their eyes with their hands and searching along the horizen for signs of a sail. Somehow the comparison gave Perk much concern, and he tried to imagine the great joy that must fill the souls of that forlorn little company when suddenly one of their number shouts

out the glorious news: "Ship ahoy—a steamer's smoke smudge to larboard!"

But it was only Suzanne asking Jack to please take a look and tell her what that lumbering, ungainly object might be which she had discovered moving across the rocks under the keel of the flying boat.

"I never happened to run across one before," Jack presently explained, "but I'm sure it must be a Mountain Charlie, as I understand people out in California call the silvertip grizzly bear. Some monster in the bargain, Miss Cramer and you'll agree with me when I say I'd rather be here than there."

She nodded her head as if to let him know he was right but when Jack saw a shadow pass over her face he understood what was in her mind—that her poor wounded Buddy might be lying there helpless, with that savage monster drawing nearer and nearer, sniffing the air and following the scent that sooner or later would take him to the spot where the fallen air mail pilot lay.

She shuddered and put a hand in front of her eyes nor could she be induced to make use of the glasses again for quite some time. She evidently feared lest she once more glimpse that horrid hairy animal, shuffling along in his shambling fashion, ready to attack any creature that came

in his way, be it bird, beast or human being for was he not the king of the mountain fastnesses, utterly unafraid?

Jack felt convinced fortune was proving kindly disposed toward their mission of humanity. That troublesome wind was slowly but surely diminishing in force and gave promise of finally dying out in another hour or so. At least they were not going to be forced to call the search off as long as daylight served. Jack had not as yet decided in his mind what to do after twilight came and the face of the country became blotted out in the gathering gloom of night.

It might be possible for them to keep going, in hopes of discovering the tempting glow of a campfire among the tall trees of the timber belt; but discretion would more than likely force them to give up operations until yet another day.

The risk would be much too great, flying at that low altitude across such a dangerous wilderness where at any minute some unseen rocky cliff might suddenly rise up before their speeding aircraft bringing about an unavoidable crash, an explosion and—oblivion!

And then it came to pass, after all those weary and distressing hours of search—this time Suzanne uttered a shrill shriek and trembling all over held out the binoculars toward Jack crying:

"Oh! tell me if I am going out of my mind Jack! Is that really and truly smoke curling up from over there?"

She clung to his arm and continued to point, trying to keep her hand from wobbling to and fro because of her emotion.

Jack quickly focussed upon the object that had caught her attention. Perk understanding what it must all be about, even if unable to catch the meaning of what was being said, watched Jack's face, well knowing how it was sure to register his thoughts.

"Smoke it is, for all the world!" Jack declared, immediately adding further words of good cheer; "and as true as you live, I can catch a gleam of sunlight falling on clear water!"

"Crater Lake, Jack?" demanded the duly thrilled girl, now all aglow with renewed hope and expectation.

"It must be," admitted the other, still looking through the glasses, "we were told there is no other body of water in this entire section. You know Bart said that old hermit was believed to have his hideout close by the ice water lake, for smoke had been seen rising of mornings when the air-mail carrier went through a bit off his course."

He made a gesture to Perk the other readily understood. It meant that he should immediate-

ly bank and go back again on the same track so they could have yet another opportunity to use their eyes and learn if things were as hopeful as they had been led to believe.

Jack managed to glance in the direction of the girl close by. It was plain to be seen that Suzanne was tremendously agitated by this sudden discovery of both the secret hideout of the so-called hermit and the nearby Crater Lake, concerning which they had heard accounts from Bart Hicks.

Not a single word passed her tightly compressed lips but in her whole demeanor there was an expression of wonder, eagerness and fear—the last no doubt on account of certain possibilities that, after all their efforts they might have arrived too late or else that the hermit had seen nothing whatsoever of the long missing flyer.

Jack too, knew they were banking on what must be called a long chance for thus far it was only a mere surmise that caused them to seek out the hidden retreat of the man who shunned his fellows. Not a single thing had come to their notice to affirm that Buddy Warner had ever flown over Crater Lake in any of his passages to and fro, although his usual course lay within a few miles of the extinct volcano.

"I'll take the stick now, Perk," he announced

as they once more caught a glimpse of that curling, eddying smoke column and then sighted the cliff encircled lake of the mountains.

One thing Jack had already settled that the sheer rocky walls did not entirely encompass the sheet of water. There was a section at the near end where the ground sloped down to the very edge of the lake. Jack could see this with his naked eye—no further necessity existed for using the magnifying binoculars, he concluded.

Then of a sudden Jack felt a warm glow pass over his whole body. What was this he saw projecting from the lake close to the shore? He had on some other occasion looked upon a wrecked plane partly submerged in some body of water, fresh or salt and here he found himself staring down at a similar object.

This would tell the story, Jack thought, better than any words could do. Some aviator must have attempted to drop down upon the lake, perhaps to ease the shock of contact when forced to descend through an accident to his outfit, that was a positive thing and what was more reasonable than to conclude the unfortunate airman must be the missing pilot for whom so many flyers were scouring the whole country up and down, east and west?

He half opened his mouth as though to call

the attention of Suzanne to his thrilling discovery and then stopped short. She would find it out for herself quickly enough and if there was a bitter disappointment awaiting the brave girl, far be it from him to hasten the coming of her grief.

Now they had begun to circle the lake itself and once directly over the body of water, Jack could see it was indeed a real gem. A small but select sheet that, save for the presence of the hermit close by, had probably never been fished by a single white man. A perfect trout preserve, he told himself, in the ecstasy of a born fisherman.

It was what Perk would call a "reg'lar cinch." There was not the slightest reason to hold back, for never an obstacle could Jack discover calculated to give them trouble in making contact with the water. Once safely floating on the surface of the mysterious lake, they could taxi over to a position close to the sloping beach where a landing might be effected in order to search for the hidden retreat of the lone settler.

Once, twice, three times did he make a complete turn around the circular pond and then having his plan laid out, he dove down until close to the shimmering surface when he suddenly leveled off and then gently continued the drop, to fall upon the bosom of the beautiful harbor al-

most as lightly as a wild duck would splash down from on high.

And then Suzanne discovered the half submerged ship, with its nose out of sight and its tail pointing up at the northern sky. It was a melancholy and ill-omened spectacle indeed, speaking as it surely did of some unfortunate airman's swift plunge from lofty heights to strike the tiny lakelet. Indeed, it might even have been his intended target when the terrible drop was first begun. Suzanne gave a cry and held out her quivering hands toward the wrecked plane as though all doubts were now removed as to her Buddy having dipped down into this pool when his ship became unmanageable.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE END OF THE AIR TRAIL

The crisis for which they had been preparing during the entire aerial trip was now a reality. Before many more minutes had passed they would know that which they came to find out—whether Buddy had clung to life during the long, agonizing interval, or had "gone west," as so many in his perilous calling had done before him in a blaze of sacrifice and glory.

They were now floating on the surface of the little mountain lake in the midst of the most wonderful surroundings the human mind could imagine. Here centuries ago had been the wide vent of an active volcano and at intervals from this same opening, now so quiet and peaceful, there had undoubtedly burst forth vast waves of molten lava accompanied by sulphurous smoke and thunderous sounds, as though nature had broken her chains and meant to reshape the whole western world.

Later on, when his mind was more at ease, Jack Ralston could in some measure paint the

terrible picture and in his mind imagine he saw the bubbling lava, rolling down the side of the rocky mountain with frightful havoc all along its tortuous course.

Just then, however, but one matter engaged his entire attention. Where was the strange hermit of Crater Lake? Why did he not show himself when he surely must have watched their coming and successful descent? Had he been able to save the life of Buddy or would they be shown a mound of earth amidst the heaped-up rocks where the valiant young air-mail pilot lay in the sleep that knows no earthly awakening.

"Look yonder, Jack—somethin' movin' among them bushes!" Perk was saying in his ear, for since the engine no longer kept up its roar and the propeller had ceased functioning, it was possible for them to hear ordinary sounds. "Mebbe now it might be that four-footed ole grizzly b'ar an' I ort to get my rattler o' a machine gun in hand."

"Don't bother about that, Perk," Jack told him, "see, it's a man, and chances are we're going to meet the queer old hermit of the mountains right now."

Even as Jack was thus quieting the fears of his chum, the object of their observation walked into full sight and was hastening to reach the

border of the clear-water lake close by where the only sign of a beach occurred.

He was not a startling figure at all and seemed garbed in ordinary clothes that had evidently been selected for long service when far away from tailors and housewives. His face was bearded and his hair white but he strode along with a swinging step that told of bodily vigor and good health.

Reaching the border of the water he seemed to be giving them the "once over," as Perk called it in his suggestive way.

"There, see, he's beckoning for us to come closer," said Jack with something approaching relief in his manner. "I see what looks like a clumsy boat made from the trunk of a tree drawn far up on the shore. Reckon he uses the old tub when he feels like doing a little fishing. We'll taxi in as close as the depth of the water allows and then if necessary we can wade the balance of the way, carrying Suzanne between us."

As he turned to start his motor he had one look at the white face of the speechless girl and as long as he lived Jack would never forget the tense agony he saw stamped there. It hardly seemed as though Suzanne was breathing as she stared at the figure of the strange old man on the shore in whose hands as she well knew, lay the

power of life and death insofar as her happiness was concerned. One word from him would tell the whole tragic story.

Then the motor began to hum and with a dextrous hand Jack sent the amphibian scurrying toward the beach. Perk meanwhile snatched up a pole he always kept handy for such a purpose and thrusting it into the water, sounded the depth as they went along.

When presently Perk called out just what he had been waiting to announce so grandly "by the mark, twain," Jack shut off the engine and the plump of the anchor immediately followed, Perk having that useful hook ready at his hand.

"You are searching for him, I take it for granted?" said the hermit, at the same time pointing to the wreck of the plane not many yards away with its disconsolate looking tail in the air and its nose apparently buried in the mud a few feet under the surface.

"Yes, we are one of a score and more of plane parties scouring the whole side of the Rockies," replied Jack, trying his best to keep his voice from breaking for the suspense had him in its grip as well as the poor girl. "Did you manage to save him, sir—tell us—or—or was it too late?"

He heard a low, bubbling cry, or was it a sob—at his elbow but his eyes were riveted on the tall

erect figure of the mysterious recluse. The other was nodding his head—surely that could be reckoned a favorable sign. Jack again summoned his courage to the fore and went on to ask the crucial question:

"This girl, sir, is the sweetheart of Buddy Warner, whose strange disappearance has thrilled the entire nation—have pity, and relieve her dreadful suspense—is he alive?"

Another nod, and in the affirmative, accompanied by a ghost of a smile. Then came the words that would ring in Jack's ears for many a moon:

"Alive, and with a good chance for recovery, I am glad——"

"Quick! catch her, Perk!" yelled Jack as he felt the girl falling in a dead faint from the reaction. The relief proved too much for the strained condition of her nerves.

A dash of ice-cold water from the lake soon revived her and she smiled at the pair bending over her so solicitously.

"We must get her ashore without any delay," announced Jack, for he had great fears lest the enraptured girl take it upon herself to jump overboard and without any assistance from either of her guardians manage to make land.

Perk instantly dropped into the water which

came almost up to his waist. It was pretty cold, but what did that matter to one so fond of calling himself a "tough old guy" and able to negotiate where others would shrink back.

Suzanne sprang into his arms as though not a second was to be lost in reaching the side of her beloved Buddy. So too, did Jack follow the example of his pal, determined not to be cheated out of the glorious sight when Suzanne and Buddy were reunited.

Once they were all ashore, dripping wet, but heedless of so little a thing under the circumstances. The master of this lonely region led them along what seemed to be a narrow, well trodden path, circulating among the piled-up rocks and trees, until presently they reached a rude shack from the stone chimney of which arose the tell-tale smoke that had been their guiding beacon in discovering the retreat of the recluse.

Suzanne dashed ahead of their guide and they heard her joyous cries as they reached the open door. She was down on her knees, her arms around a figure stretched out on a rude cot.

And so it was that Jack and Perk came upon the lost air-mail pilot whose hand they were soon squeezing with heartiest enthusiasm. Buddy was bandaged pretty well and confessed to a

broken arm and quite a lot of bruises, all of which would keep him "on the shelf" for a month or so but everything was "all right," he told them and expressed amazement as well as pride when told that Suzanne had not only received her pilot's license, unbeknown to him, but even made a long and successful solo flight in the mad desire to join in the wide search for him.

The hermit was saying nothing, only listening with great interest and Jack could easily see that somehow this strange happening must have renewed his interest in the outside world from which he had for years been a stranger.

Such chattering as followed.

The happy girl turned every little while to beam upon her two faithful squires as if she could never forget how much they had done for her. Perk stared at her as though entranced. Evidently he had never imagined there could be so much loveliness in all the wide world as he saw pictured there in her rosy face with eyes like twin stars. For such a delightful little "dame" the honest fellow would have braved the perils of Niagara or the Whirlpool Rapids, if need be, to see such rapture steal over her face. The proud feeling, that he had been able to prove of service to Suzanne in her hour of blackest

despair, would reward him ten times over for any bodily discomfort he may have endured. And Buddy too, he was surely worth finding—so jovial, so chummy in his ways and, lucky guy, with so dainty a "best girl" to hover over him and be his devoted nurse.

No one would ever know the part he and Jack had taken in this happy ending of the widely published mystery attending Buddy's vanishing in the night. The rules of the service to which he and his pal had sworn allegiance forbade such a thing as publicity. To have their pictures sent throughout the land, with an account of their previous successful labors in rounding up transgressors of the law, would put an effectual damper on any future jobs coming their way. It was not to be permitted under any circumstances whatever and not only the hermit, but both Buddy and his girl must solemnly promise never to disclose the names and vocation of the two airmen who were mainly responsible for the finding of the lost aviator.

That, however, was a minor matter to both comrades. They were not in the Secret Service of Uncle Sam for any glory or honors that might be showered upon them. They did not risk their lives day after day with any hope of being decorated with a Victory Cross or any ribbon telling of foreign service. It must be sufficient

reward for them to feel that they had performed their duty to the best of their ability, no matter what its character and, backed by the long arm of the Law, brought wicked violators to the bar of justice, there to receive the penalty for their crimes.

One thing Jack noticed almost immediately was how everything connected with the bandaging of Buddy's broken arm had been carried out with astonishing neatness. Had he been a patient in some hospital, attended by the most famous of surgeons and with a clever nurse as his attendant, he could not have been in better shape.

Jack looked again closely at the mysterious recluse, noted the keen eye, the slender, agile fingers which moved with dexterity when he fixed up some little slip in the bandage and made up his mind that the world had undoubtedly lost one of its most gifted surgeons when this unknown man took to the woods, so to speak, for some reason never known.

Buddy was a bit weak and his host bade him not to keep talking too long, since excitement would not be good for him in his present condition—indeed he had quite enough as it was. But Suzanne begged so hard to be permitted to wait upon him and promised to keep him quiet, that she was finally given permission to do so.

Perk too, had noticed the way in which the hermit had done such a wonderfully fine job in attending to the one he had rescued from drowning after the plane had crashed; for he too, seemed to steal a sly glance in the other's direction whenever he felt he could do so without being detected.

For one thing, the near miracle of Buddy's being able to drop down into the shallows near the sandy shore had doubtless kept the plane from being wrapped in flames and possibly eased the plunge more or less.

"When I dragged him out," the owner of the shack explained to Jack and the latter noted how musical his voice seemed, so full and clear in the bargain, "he would not allow me to even look at his wounds until I had found and rescued four sacks of mail. You would have thought the contents of those bags were of greater value than his own life. That is what I'd call being faithful to a trust. But now I must ask both of you gentlemen to follow me outside where, as a rule I do my cooking. While we make ready to have supper, such as the limited stores will allow, we can talk over things and you may be able to figure just how you expect to take off again in the morning for it is too late now to consider going."

A little later on, while Jack was aboard the ship getting certain things that he wanted, Perk

sidled up to the earnest old man with whom their fortunes had been so strangely thrown, and with one of his capacious grins remarked casually:

"If you'll excuse me for sayin' it, mister, I kinder guess now your name might be Doctor Whitelaw Reeves!"

When the other heard him mention that name he started as though he had been stung and looked Perk over with those keen eyes of his, and then a faint smile broke out on his stern face.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AROUND THE CAMPFIRE

"How does it come, my young friend," remarked the recluse of Crater Lake moving closer to the grinning Perk and apparently greatly moved, "that you are mentioning a name I have not heard spoken for the last seven years?"

"Huh! it happens, Doc, that I got some memory. Specially o' faces," candidly replied the aviator. "Course you've changed a heap since I knowed you, but back o' it all I could ketch the same look you had then when you fixed me up so dickey."

"Ah! that is what it means! So you were once a patient of mine. I hope I served you well, to cause you to remember me so long!" and the hermit patted Perk on the shoulder in what seemed to be a very friendly way.

"Hot ziggetty dog! I'm sayin' you did, Doc—looky here and see how the things healed up," and as he said this, Perk rolled up his sleeve, exhibiting a stout arm marked by a series of red lines zigzagging here and there and giving evi-

dence of being a reminder of a most serious wound.

The hermit looked and nodded his head.

"Rather a tough proposition it must have been," he remarked with a show of interest.

"You jest bet it *was!*" vociferated Perk. "That bally English doctor wanted to take the arm off—said it'd save my life, but what use would life be to a birdman with only one arm? Then you came along and done the trick, Doc. Never could forget what I owed you. Finest operation ever done on that line, the American surgeon said afterwards."

"Ah! very kind of him, I am sure," said Perk's companion, obviously appreciating the implied compliment, "and would you mind telling me just where, and under what conditions all this happened? It may assist me to remember the particular instance out of the hundreds I handled?"

"In the Argonne, Doc—I came down in flames after sendin' two out o' four Heinies ahead o' me. 'Member you told me my mother had ought to feel proud o' her boy—which she sure was, Doc. Course it couldn't hardly be 'spected you'd 'member me, but I guessed I'd keep thinkin' 'bout you as long as I lived. An' to think we'd run up agin each other like this—it certainly is a small world, as I've said before."

"While I don't happen to remember the particular circumstance, my friend," the other went on warmly, "it's a pleasure to know that you did pull through with both arms and have apparently continued to ply your dangerous, if glorious calling ever since. Shake hands with me, will you? I'm proud to renew our acquaintance and it comes at a turning point in my life also."

He glanced affectionately at Buddy lying there on his cot with the girl hovering over him, smoothing the blanket as only a woman can and lavishing looks of adoration on her hero pilot.

"For years I have been mourning the fact that after being shell-shocked on the battle line during the closing month of the war, I had lost my touch for my vocation; for a surgeon depends a great deal on his hands for the success of his delicate operations. Then *he* came into my life as though dropping down from heaven itself. The necessity for immediately handling his injuries started me back into the old rut again and I was thrilled to discover that my finger-tips were as sensitive as ever. Then I realized that since God was so good as to restore to me that which I feared had been lost forever, it would be wicked for me to remain shut up away from my fellows when so many suffering people were holding out their hands to me for aid. My prayer had been heard and I have resolved to go

back once more to labor in the field that can never have an over supply of workers."

What he said so seriously, so joyfully, thrilled Perk to the core. He felt that both he and his chum Jack had had at least a little to do with this loyal determination on the part of the once expert surgeon to again offer his services to the uncounted multitude of sufferers in every great city of the nation, and insofar as he could effect a cure, bring happiness to many a home that was now shrouded in darkness.

Later on, when Perk had a chance to tell this remarkable happening to the deeply interested Jack, and they had talked it all over, they came to the conclusion that the supposed loss of his skill as a result of his shock, was not the only reason causing Doctor Reeves to have that mysterious yearning to seek the solitudes of Nature in an effort to shun his fellow men. He may have met with some bitter disappointment, perhaps from the hand of the woman he loved, who had proved faithless. But all this was none of their business and Jack agreed with his pal when Perk declared they were treading on forbidden ground in even speculating about it.

"No matter what it was," Jack ended the talk by saying earnestly, "he's apparantly gotten over that upset. Time heals wounds of the heart we know, and if he's the wonderful surgeon you say,

he can do a heap of missionary work among the hospitals during the rest of his life. I'm mighty glad we've run across him and he seems to have fixed up Buddy here just prime—says he'll be able to get back on his job in four weeks and be just as good as ever."

"Bully for Doc. Reeves!" exclaimed the enthusiastic Perk, still a little dazed over the amazing coincidence of meeting the professional man to whom he owed so much.

They found that the hermit—who would be called by that name no longer if he kept his new resolution—had a stone fireplace close by his shelter where he was accustomed to carrying on such cooking as was necessary.

Perk immediately took possession of the "cooking galley" as he was pleased to call the small addition to the shack where a meagre assortment of pots and pans were hanging, and proceeded to provide supper.

He would not allow the proprietor to render the least assistance and also declined the offered help of Suzanne, telling her she could do more good as a nurse than trying to help him. He had long been waiting just such an opportunity to "sling the grub" and was not going to be knocked out of this fine chance.

Jack, knowing how the other was enjoying himself, offered no objections so Perk found him-

self monarch of all he surveyed and boss of the kitchen.

Perk dragged the clumsy dugout belonging to the late recluse to serve as a ferry between the anchored amphibian and the shore. Later on Jack saw him fetching a number of things up to the vicinity of the shack and chuckled, highly amused, to note that among them was the submachine gun with its belt of ammunition. He could readily surmise what that meant. Perk must have remembered seeing that monster silvertip bear waddling along among the piled-up masses of rock not so very far distant from the shack of their present host and with some dimly defined notion in his head that he might wish to again play sentinel and guard to the camp, was determined to be in condition to meet any situation that might arise.

Oh! well, if it pleased Perk to imagine dire things hovering over their heads, and if it afforded him real happiness to assume the duties of a posted sentry, why should any one wish to cheat him of such an innocent recreation? It could do no harm but on the other hand would give the vigilant one a feeling of satisfaction, thought Jack.

"Only I do hope," Jack was telling himself under his breath with a fond glance toward the object of his soliloquy, "if he's bound to save us

all again, his victim turns out to be a little more ferocious than a wretched half-starved prairie dog, creeping up to smell out a bone or two thrown away after a camp supper.

Perk was a busy and willing worker for the next half hour, dodging in and out, bending over his cooking fire that had been coaxed to a point approaching perfection with several pots and pans resting on the large gridiron that the ex-hermit evidently used principally for roasting his potatoes in their skins, he being no great hand at achieving culinary triumphs. Some men are born to one profession and others excel in quite another line. Doc. Reeves' specialty was surgery, that of Jack might be set down as general excellence along the duties of an air pilot and also fairly well equipped to play his part as one of Uncle Sam's energetic Secret Service men while Perk had a notion he shone in no one particular line, but could get up about as savory a meal, under existing conditions, as the best woods guide.

He certainly surpassed himself on this particular occasion. The odors that soon began to permeate the atmosphere all around that lonesome spot caused Jack to show uneasiness, as though he could hardly wait for Perk to call them to partake of the glorious feast.

"Why, if this keeps on much longer," he told

himself as he walked up and down near by as a very hungry man is apt to do when waiting for supper to be put upon the table, especially if it is in camp, where appetite reigns above ordinary likes and dislikes, "he'll have the whole neighborhood saturated with the smell of whatever he's cooking. If there's a hungry mountain lion or a half-starved grizzly within a mile of here, he'll make a trail to this nook right away. What's that Emerson wrote, that if a man invents the best mouse trap ever built the world will make the deepest kind of a trail flocking to his woods cabin to patronize him? And Perk's sure *some cook,* I admit!"

The agony was finally brought to an end and they settled down on bits of logs and a couple of ricketty chairs the self-exiled surgeon had manufactured at some time or other. A small table, also home-made, fairly groaned under the most bountiful supply of "camp grub" imaginable and the grinning Perk eager to serve it out in generous portions.

Even the injured Buddy developed an astonishing appetite. Doc. Reeves, now radiant and full of good nature at the way he had been brought back to his one consuming passion, which he feared was gone forever, declared he had not sat before such a gorgeous feast for many a long year. Suzanne too, saw fit to add her

praises while she ate and ate, as if trying to make up for the several meals she had missed while laboring under such a heavy load of suspense.

As for the cook himself, he showed no sign of his late labors having diminished his capacity for stowing away tremendous quantities of food, as those who prepare meals so often declare. But there was enough for all and a bit to be thrown out for the squirrels, rabbits, or any larger species of hungry mountain denizens that might care to investigate the appetizing odors.

They sat around in the faint light of the only lamp available, used only occasionally by the doctor on account of the difficulty of transporting kerosene such a distance on muleback, and talked on a variety of subjects. Buddy was of course eager to learn what was being said concerning the mystery of his disappearance and must have been duly thrilled when Jack and Perk recounted some of the many things they had read under flaming head-lines in the daily papers coming under their observation from time to time.

When questioned, he told in simple words just what had happened. It was nothing original, just such an eccident as might happen to the most skillful of air pilots, though not all of them live through the experience. Chancing to see the little lake which was not by any means the first time he had glimpsed it, since on several

occasions he had flown above it while carrying his mail pouches to and from airports, he had tried to make a halfway safe landing on the strip of sand at that end of the round pond but failing by a dozen or more feet, plunged into the water.

He lost all knowledge of what happened, coming to his senses a long time afterwards to find himself on a cot with the recluse just completing his wonderful job of attending to his broken arm and the many bruises about the rest of his person.

Dr. Reeves said but little, seeming quite content to listen to the voices of his little company of guests thrown so unexpectedly upon his hands but it was easy to see he was far happier that night than he had been for many years, with the future again beckoning and looming up as a wide field where he could apply his services in behalf of his fellows.

It was decided that Buddy must keep his cot for the night. They made up one for Suzanne with several fairly well cured animal pelts, mementoes of certain beasts the recluse had shot or trapped, either for their skins or to be used as a change of diet. Jack and Perk were old campaigners, and could find an apology for a bed on the ground near the fire while the surgeon said he meant to sit on a chair in the kitchen and spend the night in general rejoicing over his good fortune in "coming back."

Jack teased his chum a bit when he saw the other lugging that sub-machine gun over to where he was going to sleep, but Perk only grinned, and nodded, as though he really enjoyed the prospect of once more remaining on guard.

CHAPTER XXIX

NO PROWLERS ALLOWED

Perk was more than usually sleepy when he lay down with the gun close by the fire. Perhaps he really did not expect to be called upon to defend the camp since the doctor had assured him there had never been any serious trouble from the inmates of the wilderness, though he admitted he had now and again found some evidence in the morning that a large beast had been prowling around while he slept behind a closed door.

But having made up his mind to do his full duty, Perk was not to be turned aside either through arguments or ridicule. He lay there doing his best to keep awake by reviving long since buried memories of his activities across the sea when in France.

Then he "passed out," as he himself would have termed it, to awaken and find the fire in need of replenishing. There was an abundance of wood close at hand so, still half asleep, Perk got to his knees, picked up an armful and rising to his full height stepped over to the smoldering fire.

As he cast his burden on the red ashes some of the smaller stuff started up instantly, causing the immediate vicinity to appear as though illuminated by a flash of vivid sunlight.

Perk heard a sound that was not unlike a loud sniff. This startled him and his returning animation was hastened when he caught a low growl, thrilling him to the center of his being.

Instantly he stared in the quarter from which these strange sounds proceeded. A movement concentrated his attention on a certain point. Some object that resembled a bulky, dark, living thing commenced to rise up until the startled Perk though it would never stop growing.

There it was standing before him—the same monster he had seen from his seat aboard the air ship. A full-grown grizzly, the "Mountain Charlie" of the California ranchers and hunters, a very giant of devilish ferocity and unafraid of anything that walked on two or four feet, monarch of the foothills and canyons of the mighty Rockies!

The grizzly growled again, this time with added vigor as if wanting the wretched invader of his hunting grounds to thoroughly understand he would put up with no trifling and that he must speedily "skip the ranch" unless he wished to be scattered around the whole neighborhood in pieces.

"Holy Smoke!"

That was as far as Perk got in starting to express his agitated feelings for the standing bear had made a movement that started him toward the campfire and the amazed aviator. Perhaps by this time Jack may have also awakened but Perk gave no heed to such a possibility. As the self-appointed guardian of the slumbering camp it was up to him to stand like a rock in its defense.

No right or left tackle on the gridiron ever made a more furious plunge in an effort to stop the hurtling progress of the enemy player carrying the pigskin toward the goal posts than Perk set in motion just then, urged on as with a goad by the necessity for clutching that firearm upon which he was depending so much.

He landed in a huddle, snatched at the gun, dropped it in his wild excitement, pawed around for what seemed a full agonized minute but which evidently lasted less than five seconds and finally found himself clutching the object of his mad groveling. Even then he got mixed a bit and was presenting the butt of the weapon toward the oncoming growling bear when, recognizing his mistake he managed to swing it around.

Another blunder just then might have cost him dear but Perk, now fully alive to the emergency cooled down sufficiently to move the little lever which would start the machine-gun to spitting

out its discharges in one — two — three style as long as the belt of cartridges held out and he, Perk, refrained from shutting off the mechanism by which it was worked.

The bear was not twenty feet away when this hurricane of lead began to rain upon him with oft repeated thuds. His growls had been followed by the most dreadful roarings to which those near-by cliffs had ever echoed. He dropped down on all fours, shuffled this way and that, like a boy trying to evade the attacks of a swarm of maddened yellow jackets whose nest he had the temerity to strike with a club. But all without avail, since the now equally aroused Perk had only to switch the muzzle of his little cannon a trifle to continue bombarding him right along.

The gigantic beast rolled over this way and that, stroke to get upon his feet again, his bellows becoming less vociferous as his wounds increased with frightful rapidity. There could be no telling when Perk would ever have stopped firing only that a hand grasped his weapon and turned it upward toward the starry heavens while the voice of Jack roared in his ear:

"Hold hard, brother, you've got him shot full of holes as it is. What's the use ruining his hide? Some day you'll be proud to rest your feet on a

rug made from a genuine old grizzly you potted all by yourself out here in the Rockies."

So the fully aroused Perk managed to curb his warlike spirit a bit and shut off the flow of deadly missiles.

"Gosh amighty Jack, did you see me knock the ole hippopotamus silly when I opened on him right smart? Some ruction while she lasted, I'll tell the cockeyed world! Gee whiz! he's kicked his last an' there he lies as quiet as a lamb.

"He's your meat okay, buddy," Jack assured him after which he turned to explain the meaning of the frantic outburst of firing for both Dr. Reeves and Suzanne were in the doorway of the shack, demanding to know what it was all about and if anybody were hurt.

"Huh! on'y one that's hurt real bad lies over yonder with his toes pointin' up to the skies!" laughed the proud marksman. Reg'lar he-grizzly, with a bellow like a range bull. Tried to rush me, don't you know, but it turned out he couldn't chaw lead an' so he quit cold. An' me, I'm figgerin' on having the smartest rug you ever set eyes on made from his hairy hide if I c'n trim it from his carcass come mornin'. Some stunt for little Perk to put on the boards, if I do say it myself, as oughtn't."

"Queer how I have managed to keep the peace with that scamp for so long," observed the doctor

with a whimsical laugh, "and then he chooses to go on the warpath just when I happen to have company for the first time in years. But that was the proper caper, Perk, and you deserve to have a beautiful rug to show when telling this thrilling exploit to your grandchildren."

"Wow! go easy on a feller, please, Doc," expostulated the embarrassed Perk, "why, I ain't even got a girl yet. You see, they gimme the razzberry, mebbe 'cause I'm so handsome. But I'm meanin' to get that rug fixed up, if the pelt c'n be dragged off the big varmint in the mornin' an' that's that."

Examination showed that although a number of the bullets sprayed forth so promiscuously by the ardent sportsman had punctured the hide of the bear, these small holes would not prevent its being repaired and made useful, if one chose to spend a litle time and cash for the desired result. So while Perk absolutely refused to call his vigil off and get some sleep, he had the comforting assurance that his work had not gone for naught.

"Yeah! don't try to cramp my style, partner," he told Jack who was trying to argue that lightning seldom struck twice in the same place, "course I understand how that grizzly ain't goin' to gimme another scare, but how do we know that he ain't got a mate an' if she comes prowlin' around this roost an' runs across her big boy

lyin' there all bloody and cashed in, why she might go on a tear an' smash things into kindlin' wood. Yep, I'll finish the night on my post. Time to pick up any lost sleep when we're back in old Cheyenne jest loafin' an' waitin' for orders to start out on a fresh job."

Knowing how stubborn Perk could be when he took a notion, Jack made no further attempt to persuade him and the last he saw of the bear-killer, Perk was sitting there, his back against a stump, with the formidable machine gun across his knees, all set for business at the old stand. Let all the silvertips in the entire Rocky Mountain section step up and give him a dare, with that wonderful gun that reminded him of old days in France when he was with the La Fayette Escadrille, flying for France and her allies, he felt equal to a full dozen of the shaggy beasts.

So the balance of the night passed and finally came the dawn of a new day that would thrill the nation with the startling news covering the finding of the missing air-mail pilot.

CHAPTER XXX

BRINGING IN THEIR MAN

With breakfast out of the way Jack called what Perk termed a "reg'lar council o' war," for there were numerous matters that would have to be settled before they could take off and head for civilization.

Dr. Reeves gave it as his opinion that if great care were exercised, Buddy could be transported to the nearest town but the injured mail pilot absolutely refused to go unless his prized letter bags accompany him, such was his devotion to duty.

Then there was Perk also as set on having that valued bear skin, removed with the help of the doctor, who had learned the art of skinning an animal while cast upon his own resources. Besides, there would be two others aboard the amphibian which was apt to make things a bit crowded.

However, Dr. Reeves soon settled the matter by declaring he did not mean to accompany them. Another day, if Jack and Perk wished to have it so arranged, they could come for him. He

had some things to accomplish that would take a few hours and there was no necessity for him to be on hand when Buddy reached town to create the wildest kind of excitement. Indeed, the eminent surgeon admitted he rather shunned anything that would be apt to put him in the limelight.

"If there's anything I'd dislike," he told them modestly, "it would be to find myself in the spotlight. I hope to just slip back into the harness again and the public need know nothing save that I have changed my mind about retiring from the profession for good, having discovered that there is still more or less usefulness in my brain and fingers that ought to be put to the service of suffering humanity."

So it was arranged and without more delay than was absolutely necessary they managed to get Buddy aboard the amphibian, Jack and Perk having arranged an original floating dock that could be pushed alongside the cloud-chaser, rather than try to work the plane ashore.

The transfer was duly carried out and with such care that Buddy felt very little pain. Next the air mail, so long delayed in delivery, was stacked in various cavities so as to not take up more room than was necessary together with a rather messy bundle, Perk's prized future bear-

skin rug which he seemed to value more highly every time he gave it a look.

Everything was now ready for the hopoff and Jack figured on no trouble whatever in effecting that since the lake was long enough to permit a fair run and immediately after leaving the water he expected to start banking so as to circle and climb upward.

Dr. Reeves shook each of his new found friends by the hand and was unusually warm in saying his goodbye to the happy Suzanne. The bravery shown by the newly fledged aviatrix in taking great chances of meeting disaster when striking out to join those who were searching for signs to tell where the young air mail pilot had crashed, aroused his full admiration and he did not hesitate to tell Suzanne as much, greatly to the delight of the listening Buddy.

Standing on the sandy shore of Crater Lake the man who had come back watched the wonderful amphibian, of which the two pilots were so proud, rush across the surface of the lake, the first modern flying boat to ever splash through those ice-cold waters, and then jumping upward, cleave the air like a monster bird, circling twice, three times, to finally take off in a bee line for the town where Jack and the others had passed the preceding night.

They arrived at their destination before an

hour had passed and amidst the most intense excitement and a growing, cheering mob of men, women and children, the injured mail pilot was taken to the hospital, there to be cared for until Dr. Reeves joined him later on.

Of course Suzanne refused to be parted from her Buddy. She claimed to be a pretty fair nurse and indeed, her very presence acted like a tonic to the patient who could not keep his sparkling eyes off her pretty face for more than a minute at a time.

Jack had impressed every one with his desire for secrecy. If it could be avoided, no mention of his name or that of Perk, or their pictures, was to be given to the bustling newspaper men who would quickly be rushing in from every quarter by motor, train and airship, eager as hounds in the leash to grab up bits of news that could be woven into one of the most thrilling stories of the day to set the whole country agog, east, west, north and south.

Thanks to the care thus taken, the real facts connected with the finding of Buddy Warner were fairly well kept from the public press. All sorts of fantastic accounts were published and some even managed to bring out the names of the pair most intimately connected with the great stunt but they were so distorted that Perk had considerable fun in trying to make them out. He

declared a wizard would have his hands full with the job and that most people must believe the modest heroes, who fled before being interviewed were foreigners, to judge from their unpronounceable names.

Wishing to finish his work as soon as possible so that he and Perk could clear out before most of the keen-eyed reporters arrived, Jack concluded to hurry back to the lake, pick up Dr. Reeves and what few things he would like to carry away from the hideout where he had spent so many solitary years and once he had been landed in the airport, say a hurried goodbye to all and pull out eastward bound for Cheyenne.

That was the way Jack Ralston usually put things through. While most others would be still making up their plan of campaign, Jack was apt to be doing things with a rush and getting results. They had followed the best rules of the great organization in which they were humble cogs, let no grass grow under their feet, found what they sought and, with a Garrison finish, brought in the man they were after and whose name was on everybody's lips during those few hectic days.

Duty done, it was up to them to vanish from the picture in order to keep the public from knowing how the Government's Secret Service

had been mainly responsible for the finding of the missing air-mail pilot.

And so that same afternoon, while fresh squads of eager newspaper men were arriving hourly at the hitherto almost unknown town that had become famous over night, Jack and his pal were bound east, with a consciousness that another triumph could be laid at their door, even if, as happened so many times, the full story must be kept under cover so that the people of the underworld, in which so many of the activities of the Service were conducted might not be made familiar with the names and faces of its most energetic workers and thus be placed on their guard.

Of course it would not be long before further instructions might be expected from the Washington Headquarters detailing Jack and Perk to some fresh field of labor where once more they would find themselves pitted against some of the most nimble-witted lawbreakers known to modern days. That the adventurous pair would acquit themselves with credit can be taken for granted for they were always earnest, hard workers and as a rule able to accomplish the most difficult of jobs submitted to their charge by those who managed all such matters in the National Capital.

In the pages of the next volume of this series of thrilling stories covering the exploits of the

Sky Detectives, the title of which is *"The Sky Pilot's Great Chase;* or, *Jack Ralston's Dead-Stick Landing"* will be found further lively happenings when the daring pair are sent forth to cross the international boundary and speed into the far North in the effort to apprehend a fugitive from justice whose arrest and return to Washington had become a matter of the greatest moment to the authorities. How they outwit the lawbreakers and finally get their man, makes this a story replete with thrills and exciting situations.

THE END

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In selecting the books of this series we, as publishers, have tried to present a varied assortment, which will stir the imaginations of all boys. At the same time we have kept these stories from being nerve-wreckers.

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WILLIAM DIXON BELL
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Moon Colony, The.
Secret of Tibet, The.

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